

## Work Header

Rating:

- [Teen And Up Audiences](#)

[Archive Warning:](#)

- [No Archive Warnings Apply](#)

Category:

- [M/M](#)

Fandom:

- [IT \(Movies - Muschietti\)](#)

Relationship:

- [Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier](#)

Characters:

- [Eddie Kaspbrak](#)
- [Richie Tozier](#)
- [Mike Hanlon](#)
- [Beverly Marsh](#)
- [Bill Denbrough](#)
- [Ben Hanscom](#)
- [Stanley Uris](#)
- [Patricia Blum Uris](#)
- [Myra Kaspbrak](#)

Additional Tags:

- [Alternate Universe - 1980s](#)
- [Polish Eddie Kaspbrak](#)
- [Summer Romance](#)
- [Soviet Lore and Visuals for your enjoyment](#)
- [Getting Together](#)
- [Developing Relationship](#)
- [they're in love. and they will be. this has a happy ending](#)
- [Eddie's Fiat 126p](#)
- [Screenwriter Richie](#)
- [Immigration & Emigration](#)
- [mentions of alcohol and potential infidelity](#)
- [if u see it that way but myra does tell him to get out and not come back before anything happens](#)
- [Mutual Pining](#)
- [Eddie Study](#)

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Part 1 of the [motion picture](#) series [Next Work →](#)

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## cherry vodka

[Lvslie](#)

### Summary:

*“Baby,” Richie’s voice unstitched with laughter. And Eddie’s skin burning up, in the palms and fingertips. Hands clasped on the steering wheel, he takes a sharp turn. Richie’s shoulder digs into his. G-force. And little space.*

*Eddie breathes in. His chest hurts like the nonexistent airbag is already pushing into it.*

*Like he’s already crashed.*

[Or, American screenwriter Richie comes to shoot a movie in late Soviet era Poland and meets Eddie K., sound technician, hobbyist car mechanic.]

### Notes:

disclaimer: before you read this you need to understand i have a very complicated relationship with this country and i ran away from there as fast as i could as soon as i could. but i also kind of love it.

dedicated to void @slaviceddie on twitter for enabling me and percy @partialysstars for beta-reading this. love u.

section titles from a poem by czesław miłosz

please be gentle with this one, a whole lot of my heart is in it

[update: *all the absolutely stunning and breathtaking art made for cherry vodka can be now found [here](#). ♥* ]

(See the end of the work for [more notes](#).)

## Work Text:

### I. LEARN TO PREDICT A FIRE WITH UNERRING PRECISION

SEPTEMBER 1988

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The engraving on the door says *E. + M. Kasprzak*.

There's a thin cross on the wall, Christ hanging over the room like he's given up the fight as well, Virgin Mary and John Paul raising hands in desperate prayers along the yellow tapestry on the walls. The room is filled with a specific scent, mothballs from the old fur coats, a heavy perfume imported from France by a friend of the family. High position clerk. Good connection.

"So you came back," she says, quietly. "I knew you would."

The room is filled with Maria, unawares. Silver cutlery from her dowry, polished as if never used, and thin pre-war porcelain on hand-sewn lace serviettes. Maria Wilczyńska, daughter of Warsaw's remaining *inteligencja*. Good Catholic family, old school, a surgeon. A reasonable mother. *Not many such people left, they killed them all off in the war. Stick to her.* Maria, with her old manners, evocative devotion and a cantabile drag from Kraków. Nothing like Sonia, not at first glance. *But she'll know how take care of you*, mother has said. Edward Kasprzak, Maria's weak, wispy husband. *He doesn't say much, does he? Works himself to death.* She takes care of him. Something ruthless, maybe, about the devotion in her eyes.

If Eddie is in the room, he must be as translucent as air.

"By some miracle, I got us meat for Sunday," Maria says coolly, straightening the lacy serviette and rearranging the porcelain. She looks up at Eddie with her large pale eyes. Something in her tone becomes clipped. "Why are you so dirty again? I can't bear it when you come back like this. You know it. All you do is humiliate me. You're just like your father. Your mother warned me, you know—walking around at strange hours, God knows with what people. She warned me. But you won't be out in that garage, tomorrow, will you? We'll have a proper dinner with my parents."

"I'm in love with a man," Eddie says.

Maria breaks the porcelain.

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JUNE 1988

On June 26th, 1988, late morning, Eddie slams his briefcase on the backroom table in fury. “What the *fuck* is this racket from the rehearsal room?”

He’s woken up with a headache. The tense and nerve-grating conversation with Maria which followed has done little to alleviate it. His car ran out of fuel halfway to work, and earned him a ticket for parking incorrectly. He’s almost yelled at the *MILICJA* officer, missing being detained by a hair’s breadth. Stalked to the heavy-set building of The Documentary and Feature Film Studio shaking with anger and nerves, body threatening to dip into the low of caffeine withdrawal any moment now, desperate for nicotine he ostensibly isn’t addicted to. Stormed up the stairs like a misfired thunderbird, barely taking notice of the buzzing group of odd-looking people down the hall.

“Oh, it’s the Americans,” Patty replies in vague amusement, blowing out smoke. “They’re making a *movie*.” The word drawled out, with air quotes. “Or they *will* be making a movie? Some arthouse production. Fancy stuff, you know. Scouting for locations, for now, doing table reads. You’re actually doing sound for them later on, I think.”

“They’re making a movie *here*?” Eddie spits out, so incredulous his anger is momentarily unbalanced. “*Jesus*.”

Patty shrugs, and stifles a yawn. “It’s different for them. *Foreign*.”

She’s sitting on her desk with her legs crossed, tilting one shoe on the toe of her right foot. Patty Blum. Large round glasses, dark hair, shrewd dark eyes. Mildly caustic smile framed in a perpetual halo of smoke. Eddie likes her more than most other people in his life, which he finds somewhat depressing.

She goes on, drowsily, “Mark my words, someone will end up running off to America with a movie star.”

“Right,” Eddie grits out, through the pulses of his nauseating headache. “Sure. That’ll happen.”

Patty fixes him with an unimpressed glance through the screen of smoke. She slides off the desk and walks up to the window, tilting her head to look down. “You act like these things never happen,” she says, dispassionate. “But I know people. And I love a scandal. Need a painkiller, honey?”

Eddie shakes his head miserably. “No, I just need coffee.”

“Well, I’ve got *that*, too.” She goes up to the menacingly drab chipboard wall unit and pulls out a tin can. Squints at the label. “Or, well, the *closest* it gets to the real thing. Oh, and by the way. Do you still want me to write you down for the,” she draws air quotes with her right hand again, “*summer contract out of the city*?”

It’s mildly illegal, but *everything* is, and *everyone* does it, and it means a contractually-approved vacation from Maria.

Gripped by sudden relief, Eddie sighs out, “Yes.”

He shuts his eyes briefly. Pictures a colourful sequence: driving away, full speed, running through an airport. Two people holding hands in travel clothes. *Like a movie*.

“What are they like?” he finds himself asking, deflating somewhat. He needs to cool off anyway. “The Americans.”

Patty turns her head towards him with a big smile. “Loud.”

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Patty. In a sense, the closest thing to a friend Eddie has.

He spent the last Christmas Eve lying to Maria that he had to stay at the office and work. He didn’t. He couldn’t *bear* the thought of coming home, it made him something along the lines of sick.

They sat down in his office with Patty, the only person on duty, by wan yellow lamplight, drank reheated *barszcz* out of paper cups, then ate something that could probably be chocolate if you could find it in yourself to be generous.

*But it’s Christmas, isn’t it? Time of kindness.* Eddie tinkered with Patty’s radio so it picked up one of the Western stations. Playing something wistful.

Patty handed him an orange.

Eddie had never been allowed to eat oranges. *Allergic*, Sonia would say. He knew from the other kids that they’d get them for Christmas, imported to shops for special stamps. His mother needed the stamps for medication.

*Just a sickly child.*

“You’ve never had one?” Patty muttered, watching him from behind her coke-bottle glasses.

“No.” It felt almost humiliating how much he liked the taste.

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Up on the stage, a bunch of people are doing a table reading of something that sounded like a bad script. Despite himself, Eddie allows himself a moment of curiosity, fixing them with a keen assessing look en route to the provisional sound room at the back. A bizarre collection of drowsy, *striking* people. Eclectic, but somehow all fitting together. *Some of them actors*, Eddie assesses hazily, eyes scanning the side profiles, as he cuts through the shadow and manoeuvres his way in between the sound equipment. Beautiful in that strange, intimidating way. The rest, presumably, on the writing team and production.

Distracted, he stumbles while squeezing himself behind the amplifier, nearly spilling the scalding coffee. Cursing under his breath, Eddie places the chipped mug on the workstation, then looks up surreptitiously to check if he’s been spotted.

One of the people he's mentally assigned to the writing team has turned in his seat, shooting a bluntly curious look at Eddie. Angular face, angular glasses. Scruffy, like he hasn't had time to shave. Eddie's eyes collide with his briefly; instantly he frowns and ducks down to adjust the wires. An instinctive thought, well-known and burning, only stronger today in the lingering discomfort of poor sleep—

*Don't look at me.*

He tries to calm down, then, fixing his focus solely on the methodical process of setting up sound, switch by switch, value by value. The effort is half-successful at best, his already-scattered thoughts drifting back and latching onto wisps of dialogue that come floating from the stage as he drinks his scalding coffee too fast, burning his tongue to numbness.

"Look," a red-haired woman speaking, with a strange, lilting intonation, "this isn't a matter of feeling, this is a *business transaction*. And the way we do business here—"

Short, with a grey streak cutting in, "Bev, what the *fuck* was that?"

"What? I think that's what my script says, I can't tell with the amount of Richie's scribbles over it but —"

"No, I mean, what the *fuck* was that accent?"

Curly-haired man in a cardigan, monotone, "She's supposed to be *German*—"

"*German*? There's no fucking Germans mentioned in—"

Low, velvety voice, tired, "Rich, what's Bev's angle here again?"

Scruffy glasses, now, "Huh? *Shit*, I don't know, maybe—"

Biting down at his lower lip, Eddie zones out as he squints at the control board. *Fuck, there it is*, disconnected. Putting his coffee aside one more time, he slowly draws himself up, attempting to reach over the counter and tug the cord back.

Bad *fucking* day. Losing his balance, Eddie drops the cord, thigh and hands landing on the table. The coffee falls, jostled, and spills onto the amplifier.

"*Kurwa*," Eddie says. *Loud*. Into the mic.

A vast and ringing silence.

The scruffy screenwriter whips around again. Wide-eyed behind his stupid *fucking* coke-bottle glasses.

The rest of the cast and crew shoot Eddie half-disinterested glances. For a moment, he freezes in place, half-crouched, caught like a deer in headlights.

"Anyway," the director deadpans, says, turning back to the woman, "if you're doing an accent, Bev, we need someone to *work with you* on the accent, that was bad regardless of where it's supposed to be from."

"*Bite* me, Stanley, I'd like to see *you*—"

"Hey, Rich, what does this say?"

The screenwriter turns away his head, at last.

Face burning, sick to his stomach and shaking slightly—from adrenaline or the foul coffee, he’s not sure—Eddie forces himself to return to his task.

---

“Uh, hi.”

Eddie looks up and nearly twitches in surprise.

The screenwriter, Tozier, is standing in front of him. He’s taller and broader up close, looming over the counter.

“You okay there?” he asks, slowly and loudly, gesturing between them. “Need help with anything?”

He mimes something like heavy-lifting. Eddie frowns.

“I do understand you, you know,” he says darkly.

“Oh, okay. Uh—sorry,” Tozier says. He sticks his hands in his pockets, swaying lightly on his feet and pointing at Eddie with his chin. “I just—didn’t know if you speak English. Sorry. I’m, uh. I’m Richie? Tozier? I write for the—”

“I know, I do the sound for your rehearsals,” Eddie cuts in.

Richie winces.

“Right,” he says. He seems abashed. “Right. Well, anyway. I’ll just—”

In a sudden flash of self-awareness, Eddie thinks, *the fuck are you doing?*

“Kasprzak. Edward Kasprzak,” he says, fast, before he can second-guess it. The formality of it tastes ridiculous on his tongue, stilted and ill-fitting. To disguise it somehow, he stretches out his hand.

Richie blinks.

“Oh. Cool,” he says, giving Eddie’s hand a firm shake.

Big hand. *Soft.*

He says, “Nice to meet you, *Edward.*”

“Right,” Eddie sighs, then rubs at the bridge of his nose, wincing. “Look, I’m ... I’m sorry for interrupting your rehearsal, okay? Also for being a dick, I guess. This is a bad day. And I haven’t even had coffee yet, because I spilled mine all over your sound equipment. Which—which I will fix, I promise, there’s no permanent damage.”

“Nah, don’t worry about that,” Richie says amiably.

Then, “Coffee on me? To make up for the bad day? Maybe turn it around?”

Eddie looks up, brows knitting together. Richie is looking at him with a small, somewhat stupid smile.

“Uh. Sure,” Eddie says curtly, feeling suddenly disoriented. He can’t quite explain the sudden nervous feeling in his hands.

---

They end up in the dingy Institute canteen down the well-worn stairwell. The air is gauzy with smoke, space crowded with drowsy employees on long-invalid breaks. A persistent, nitpicking voice in Eddie’s head insists he take Richie to *Zodiak* instead, get lunch in the cafeteria below the bright neon letters, show off what little worth showing off he’s got to work with. A saner, more reasonable voice counters, *why the fuck would you do that*.

The canteen is a closed space, if not claustrophobic then at the very least somewhat *stifling*. Light filters slow and heavy through the half-barred windows, and the dun linoleum is scraped and peeling in places. The only other person at the bar are a stocky red-nosed man in a sheepskin coat reading a crumpled issue of *People’s Tribune* and a pale woman with a perm staring off into space with glazed eyes and a cigarette butt between her two fingers. Low resolution music from past decade oozes from the old radio in a wispy female voice, *if you only wanted it would be summer already*—

“*Love* this vibe you’ve got going here,” Richie’s voice rings out, startlingly close. He drawls out the sentence as if purposefully obnoxious, half-joke, half-performance. He’s straining his neck to get a good look around as he slides onto his seat. “Everything is like, seductively ugly.”

“Just ugly,” Eddie says tersely, hand tightening around his cup. The coffee they’ve been served looks nauseatingly strong but the dim headache in his temples threatens to stick if he doesn’t drink.

Richie turns his head back to him. He scrunches up his nose lightly under the angular glasses. Blue eyes.

“Why, aren’t you just a little ray of *sunshine*,” he mutters, sounding amused. Eddie’s eyes snap up once again. He frowns.

“That’s,” he begins. “Probably the last thing anyone who’s had the misfortune to work with me would ever call me,” he says, seriously. *Mostly* seriously. Richie snickers.

He has a nice smile. Wide, kind of crooked. Oddly endearing.

Eddie frowns again and takes a sip of coffee. Winces.

“So,” Richie says, still watching him curiously as if Eddie were a new strange segment on the afternoon television. “What’s your damage?”

Eddie swallows with difficulty. “What’s that mean?” he manages, wincing.

“Well, what’s got you in this lovely mood?”



For a moment, Eddie attempts to find words to convey something along the lines of, *everything*. But before he can do it, someone's hand is on his shoulder, pulling insistently.

"Kasprzak, they need you in C6, someone fucked over the electricity and the other guy is gone."

Eddie gives Richie what he hopes is an apologetic look. "Sorry, I have to go. Thanks, uh, for the coffee."

As he leaves, he has a strange feeling Richie is watching him go. He doesn't turn.

---

The week goes by, sluggishly, and somehow everything grows even worse.

On Wednesday, he leaves the building in the middle of work, led with a dimly sizzling feeling of frustration and faint echoes of the headache still resonating in his skull.

Outside is damp, a hazy curtain of grey drizzle. *Cold*, fingers feeling like bones temporarily clothed with numb skin. Eddie sticks them in the pockets of his worn jacket, looking distractedly at the grey, blurry horizon: the overcast sky bending down as in tiredness to heavily touch the grey concrete.

He turns his head, meaning to see if the battered bench by the rows of rheumy, impenetrable windows with Soviet propaganda posters, is somehow shielded from rain.

He almost twitches in sharp surprise.

Hunched under the wispy leaky canopy, outlined by the washed-out *COME TO WORK SOBER AND WELL-RESTED* and *BY INCITING TO DRINK YOU BURDEN YOUR CONSCIENCE* posters, entirely jarring in the grey brutalist haze of rain, there's him.

Eddie's own private American.

He's smoking, lost in thought. Even caught from the side, his eyes seem glazed, red-rimmed. Clothes and hair dishevelled. Some jarring despondency to his whole shape, folded as if to make himself smaller.

Eddie bites down at the inside of his cheek, frowning.

Most of his instincts are entrenched by Sonia's relentless repetition. She's taught him, it would seem, to approach people like wild animals: *Don't pick fights, don't ask, don't provoke, don't speak. Don't maintain eye contact. Don't touch it, don't come near. Don't. Don't.*

He's done it all and *more* in defiance while still a kid, and then given in inevitably to a deep-rooted exhaustion that's crept up on him along the years. *Why resist. Why not just go through the motions for the sake of peace.* "Don't be your father," Sonia would say, tearfully, but sometimes Eddie thinks she *wants* him to be. His father as remembered from home, and at home Frank has mostly been tired. Tired of Sonia, which Eddie easily understands. Tired of Eddie, which he's come to understand with time.

Now caught in the cutting-cold shimmer of rain, Eddie finds himself looking at Richie Tozier's scruffy face, and feels something shift. Something inside him pushes against the instinct.

He takes a step towards the bench.

"You okay?" he hears his own voice before reason could overtake it.

Richie blinks up at him. His eyes are tired, and slightly asymmetrical, and seem bluer now, maybe in contrast with the monochrome around.

"Oh, *hi*," he says, voice smaller than Eddie has expected from him. "Yeah, no. I'm fine. Peachy."

"Sure," Eddie retorts. "I like to sit out in the rain in this kind of weather when I'm fine, too. Just so I feel even better."

Richie shoots him another blank look, but it seems mildly curious now.

"You're out here *right now*," he points out, vaguely amused.

"Yeah," Eddie says, "cause I feel fucking awful. What's with this pathological need you people have of telling everyone how *amazing* everything is? *I'm fine, I'm great, how are you*. Bullshit."

Slowly, Richie's mouth stretches into a crooked smile.

"Huh," he says. "Eds gets off a good one. Guess so."

Eddie's eyes narrowed. "What did you just call me?"

Richie shrugs, then shifts on the—*wet, he's sitting on rain-soaked wood*—bench and holds out the cigarette packet to Eddie. "Want one?"

"I don't smoke," Eddie announces stiffly.

"Yeah, only I *know* you do," Richie tells him, grinning. "Cause I saw you on the parking lot the other day. Crouching in the dark like a good kid so the teacher won't catch you."

Eddie frowns again. "Are you following me or something?"

But he sits down on the damp bench next to Richie, and takes one cigarette.

"Sure," Richie says merrily. "Case study. For the script."

"Fucking *fascinating*," Eddie mutters, shielding the flame with his hands as Richie lights it for him. "I'll sue you for copyright infringement after you get your Oscar. Get rich."

"How do even you know what that is, don't you have like, *censorship* here?"

Eddie blows out the smoke with an annoyed huff. "Do you *know* what censorship means? Or did you just read it somewhere and thought you're smart enough to guess?"

Richie tsks at him. "Oh, look at you, wiseass. Debilitating comeback, Spaghetti."

He grimaces, face crumpling, before Eddie manages to snap back.

“No Oscars for my movie,” Richie says, sullen. “If there’s even gonna *be* a movie. Shit’s kind of falling apart, Eds.”

“What, why?” Eddie says, startled. “You’ve *just* come here, and it’s already over?”

Richie winces again. “Bad script. And I don’t even mean Bill’s garbage pitch, because that’s *always* baseline terrible and we kind of workshop it from there. I *mean*,” he snuffles, scratching his jawline, “anything I come up with *now* is effectively shit. Somehow more with each take.”

“You came here not knowing what you’re shooting?” Eddie says incredulously, which Richie answers with a noncommittal shrug. “Where the fuck do you get the money for that.”

“Oh, that’s all on Stan the Man, he believes in *The Process*,” Richie says in a startlingly accurate parody of the cardigan man’s deadpan voice. “And it’s not like this trip cost us that much to begin with. We might actually be saving money.”

That, Eddie can believe.

Richie snuffles again, pushing up his glasses.

It all has a distinct eerie quality, the rain, the unrelenting expanse of concrete surrounding them, two people huddled at a junction where the leaky ceiling meets the blinded windows. Two strange bodies coinciding on elliptic trajectories in space. Eddie watches Richie’s hand draw a shaky trail of smoke in the air. *Tangent*.

“See, I,” Richie says at length, indistinctly. He rubs at his left eye under the glasses. “To come up with something better, I’d need, like, somewhere to write. Somewhere that’s not this fucking shithole. I mean, no offense.”

“None taken,” Eddie mutters. He bites down at his lower lip again.

Then, “I have a place.”

*What the fuck.*

“Huh?” Richie says, looking up at him blearily. His left eye was reddened where he’s rubbed at it.

“Kind of a summer house,” Eddie feels his mouth form the words, without actually processing them. “I have a car to work on, side job. Could rent you a room. Could use some of that *money* you’re saving.”

Richie blinks. “Like in the suburbs? Out of the city?”

“Yeah,” Eddie says, looking away to the enervating panorama of Warsaw ahead of them. “Well, countryside, really. Nothing much. Less than you expect, most likely: no central heating, can’t live there in winter, it gets fucking freezing. No movie star hotel.”

*This is insane*, Eddie thinks calmly, taking another drag of his cigarette. *You’re fucking insane. Crazy. But it’s okay because he obviously won’t say yes anyway. Will fuck off to America before he can even think to question why you offered.*

In a sense, it's a nice thought. Grounding. Eddie does these things sometimes, allows himself tiny, split-second acts of sharp courage. Aimed *only* at those who won't tell. Committed *only* when doomed from the beginning.

"Dude," Richie says. When Eddie meets his gaze, there's a sudden manic glint in his blue eyes. He sits up, pushes up his glasses again. "Fuck, yeah, *okay*. Hell yeah I'll come live in your cottage."

Eddie's entire body goes on fire.

"Huh?" he manages.

"I mean—cause you offered," Richie instantly backtracks, slightly abashed. "So I thought—were you joking? You don't have to, I mean, this isn't really, uh, standard—"

"No, I wasn't joking," Eddie hears his own voice, spitfire fast but *steady* over the violent static of blood in his head. "If you want to, it's a deal."

Richie stares at him.

Then, "Well, then, deal," he says.

---

"Your father wasn't a good man, Edward. He left us."

Just like that. Eddie tried to picture it. To just leave.

"Don't ask me about him," Sonia would then say, sharply.

So Eddie had been *thinking* about Frank instead. Working in a garage in Chicago (*Chee-kah-goh*, he repeated to the other kids out on the yard. *And just where the fuck is that?*). Imagines him tall, intimidating, greasy with motor oil. Then tried to map the blurry picture to the tinny smoke-rough voice on the phone, speaking Polish to a funny cadence. Sounds rounded. Map Sonia's scathing remarks to the brown paper parcels full of prescription drugs she kept stashed in the kitchen cupboard. (*For my nerves*, she says. *God only knows how bad my poor nerves are.*) Brown paper parcels full of flashy white American running shoes Eddie never even got to wear.

"He doesn't even know you are sick," Sonia would say when he asked about them, shaking with something Eddie imagined must be anger. "Doesn't know his own *son* is sick."

He looks at Maria now, in her floral housecoat and her pale face, flushed in anger as she hovers in the doorway, chest heaving.

"If you leave again," she whispers, low and furious, the feared judgement of neighbours being the only thing keeping her voice for growing shrill and cutting, "If you leave now, don't bother coming back."

Eddie looks her in the eyes. *Yes*.

The elevator door clatters shut. Light flickers, as if tuned to Eddie's racing heart. He exhales, shakily, looking at his ashen reflection in the grimy mirror. Treacherous light: half-shadowed like this, he barely looks alive.

---

Eddie half-expects, half-hopes no one will be waiting downstairs except his Fiat 126p.

But he's there. Richie, in a baseball cap, an obnoxious leather jacket, with an Adidas travel bag slung over his shoulder. Leaning against a poster pillar with a *THE POLISH-SOVIET FRIENDSHIP IS PEACE AND INDEPENDENCE. HAPPY TOMORROW OF OUR HOMELAND* poster, he looks—

*Fucking surreal*, Eddie thinks, heart-rate picking up.

Richie sees him. He grins and gives a little wave.

"Hi," Eddie says, curtly, trying to get a grip.

"Hey, landlord," Richie says. "Lead the way."

"I'm, uh, parked over there," Eddie says and points with the car keys. Richie's eyes follow the direction. He bursts out laughing.

"What's so fucking funny," Eddie snaps, heat rising in his face.

"How the fuck," Richie chokes out, "am I supposed to fit inside?"

---

Richie *would* fit inside, barely so, but he *would*, because everything can fit inside Eddie's damned car if he wants it there bad enough.

Once, on a rare impulse of wanting freedom, he'd signed up to drive up North to Gdańsk in dead of winter for a tech delivery, sound equipment stacked so tall in the backseat he barely had the space to move his elbows.

On the way back, he'd driven through the monotony of forests—white with snow, rigid from frost even in the breath-stifling wind. Stopped by a lake, somewhere in Masuria, stretched taut between two crescents of trees.

Went out onto the ice waiting for it to crack.

But either he hadn't weighed enough, or hadn't wanted it enough.

*When you freeze*, a little voice in his head had said, *it doesn't hurt after a time. Like falling asleep.*

Maria threw a fit after he got back. Gone four days, he came back near-catatonic with pneumonia. Deaf to her increasing hysteria, he refused to take medicine or go to a doctor. Shivering, dosing himself with hot milk and honey and garlic, he went to bed. Locked the door. Sweated in feverish near-delirium for three days, before emerging meek and pliant towards her ruthless ministrations.

It remained one of his clearest memories, even so.

---

Richie fits inside. Squeezed in his seat, knees hitting the dashboard. Holding on tightly to the handle over the door, elbow propped on the armrest. He's rolled the window half-down, and the wind is pushing in, tousling his hair so it falls dishevelled over the forehead.

Eddie drives fast, the small red Fiat speeding down the narrow curving road, cutting through the lurching sea of shockingly yellow rapeseed. He drives with a strange *good* feeling, half-giddy, half-tense with adrenaline. Eddie likes driving.

The way should take two hours, it takes *him* forty minutes.

"This is both how I *wanted* you to drive and how I now really wish you didn't," comes Richie's voice, muffled by the wind.

Eddie snorts, tilting the steering wheel with one hand, reaching to close his own window with the other, "You *wanted* me to drive?"

Richie throws him a look Eddie *feels* rather than sees, keeping his eyes trained dutifully ahead, "Uh-huh," he says, clearer. "For consistency. Character profile."

Eddie snorts. He put his other hand on the wheel and kicks at the accelerator, the car ducking under the canopy of old, bending willows. The light scatters over them, cleaved by the leaves.

"My wife fucking *hates* my driving," Eddie says, words fast and half-coherent. He doesn't know why he's saying it, "each time we'd go somewhere, she wouldn't get in the car until I promised to go under the limits. Each time I sped up, she'd go into hysterics. Say I wanted to *kill her*. Well, it fucking killed *me* to go slow, you know? I mean—how can you stand it? You have to let it go somewhere or else you'll, I don't know—"

He shakes his head, suddenly lost for words. There's a pause, strangely empty. Eddie can't look away from the road.

Then, "You're *married*?" Richie asks, a strange note to his voice that might be amusement, might be something else. "Damn, I wouldn't have *guessed*." "Oh, fuck you," Eddie snaps, letting go of the wheel long enough to flip him off. Richie snickers.

Maria's face flashes before Eddie's eyes: pale, flushed with anger, outlined with the dreary backdrop of their frigid apartment as the elevator door clatters shut. A sting of something cold tears through him, spiking the strange satisfaction. It wells up higher.

“Well, I mean,” he says, voice almost cracking on the high vowel. He grips the wheel, “I don’t think—not for much longer.”

Richie’s eyes are on him again, and it feels different now. “Huh?”

“Married,” Eddie says curtly, stomach lurching. “I won’t be. For much longer.”

Richie gives a startled laugh. “Oh, man,” he says. “I’m sorry.” He doesn’t *sound* sorry.

Eddie inhales through his nose, eyes fixed ahead. They emerge into the fields now, half-way to the destination.

Indistinctly, he says, “I’m *not*.”

Richie hears, clearly, because he laughs.

“Well, then *hasta la vista, baby*,” he says, singsong. One side of Eddie’s mouth curves up, unwitting. He floors it.

---

The car turns, then sinks smoothly knees-deep into the sun-yellowed leaves of grass and wheat.

“We’re *almost* here,” Eddie mutters, squinting.

The summer house sits hiding at the foot of the hill, shielded snugly with oak, hazel and chestnut trees. Eddie remembers seeing it across the field as a child, one of the early summers before Frank left. Remembers pointing to the animal in the middle, asking a tremulous question.

“It’s not a bull, it’s a cow, kid,” Frank said, then, not looking.

That summer Eddie learned he could run very fast if he took to it.

---

Richie whistles as he walks. Hands stuck in his pockets, shoulders lightly hunched, bent forward as if he wants to appear smaller than he is.

*It doesn’t help at all*, Eddie thinks, throwing him a sideways glance. Richie draws attention front and center, from broad shoulders and loud-pitched voice to the vibrant orange of his patterned shirt.

“Oh, *real* cute,” Richie says, sticking out his chin at the little house, as Eddie pulls the gate closed behind them, the car momentarily abandoned outside. Unthinkingly, he’s put a hand on the small of his back to usher him in, then withdrawn it, as if the leather of Richie’s jacket burned him.

He keeps thinking about it, unsettled, as he latches the gate. And then suddenly stops, an involuntary smile pushing its way onto his face.

There it *is*.

"It's not actually mine," Eddie says half-consciously, making an ellipse around Richie. "It's my father's."

The house has belonged to Franciszek, and as most things he's left behind in his hurry to get out of Eddie's life, has then functionally become Sonia's.

But for some reason, this was the one thing she's never wanted. Wouldn't go *near* it. Too close to the countryside, maybe, too close to the *dirt*. She's never like getting dirty, and never wanted her son getting dirty. But Eddie didn't mind. And Frank didn't care.

"Or if he does, he's too far away for it to matter," Eddie finishes hastily, stalking through the garden. The grass needs mowing, tall and thick. "I found the keys. And I thought, hey, if no one else is using it —"

"How did your father even end up in the States?" Richie interrupts, trailing behind him.

Good question. Eddie's never known for sure. Sonia spoke derisively of *connections*, like connections weren't the last thread holding anything in the country together, and even more obscurely of a shipyard contract in Gdańsk, of somehow *getting* a Visa.

*How do you get a Visa?* Eddie has thought, but never asked, throughout the however-many international connections which Sonia stealthily eavesdropped on, picking up the receiver in the other room. She said it was a spur of the moment decision, a bad mistake, something Frank just woke up and *did* one day, to hurt and spite her.

But sometimes Eddie would think it couldn't possibly be true. Things like that take thought and effort. It must've been planned. Must've been wanted.

"He worked at the shipyard. Got a Visa, got a contract."

"And didn't take you with him?" Richie's voice follows him as Eddie runs up the stairs.

He grimaces, untangling the right key from the bunch. "Why *would* he."

And before Richie can comment, "We'll need to get the well working today."

"The *well*?" Richie asks, incredulous. He's drawn to a reluctant halt in the overgrown grass at the bottom of the stairs, looking up and around curiously.

"Yeah, it's behind the house. Do you *want* to shower? Because if you want to shower, we're fixing up the well," Eddie shoots at him across his shoulder, still struggling with the door.

Richie scrunches up his nose. "You need help there? That shit looks like a bunker."

"Yeah, well, it's ship steel," Eddie says. "My uncle got it from the docks when he was working here, drove down, made a door out of it. Basically unbreakable."

"That's—"

Eddie wrenches the double door open. Without waiting for the end of Richie's sentence, he steps inside.



It's familiar. Dusty. Old honey-brown wood. A permanent scent of resin, mild notes of the bunched-up dried lavender he'd left stashed hurriedly in closets to keep the bugs away. Drawing to a halt, Eddie inhales, slowly.

It doesn't really feel like home, it has no *right* to. But it feels like something—well, *close*.

He draws further inside, wood creaking invitingly under his shoes, and casts a glance around the front room—*veranda*, Frank used to misleadingly call it—then pulls at the kitchen door and props it open with a log of timber.

The shutter windows are cinched closed. *We'll have to unlock them.*

He realises suddenly that Richie has remained stranded outside.

"What are you doing out there?" he calls out. "Come on in."

There's a shuffling outside, then rushed footsteps. Seconds later, Richie emerges through the front door. Immediately, he hits his head on the door-frame.

"Aw, *fuck*," he mutters, hunching slightly and rubbing his head. In the enclosed wooden space, he seems ridiculously tall. *Stupidly tall*. In his stupid jacket and a loud shirt. Eddie purses his mouth. He makes a vague gesture in the air.

"Well," he says. "There it is."

He points to the double bed pushed up to the window nook of the veranda.

"This is where you'll be sleeping. I know it's not that ... *private* but the only other bed is in the room by the kitchen and to be honest, I don't ... I don't think you'd fit in it."

"No, this is cool," Richie says quickly. He lets his travel bag slide to the floor and looks around.

Reaches up casually. Pats one of the balks supporting the ceiling. "I like it."

He indicates the other side of the room: a small table by the window, and a ladder.

"What's up there?"

"Attic," Eddie says. Then he adds, darkly, "And there, my worst enemy."

Richie blinks at him, round blue eyes behind his glasses. He lets out a low whistle, "Your enemy? That you keep in the attic? *Damn*, Eddie. I'll say this offer of yours is maybe getting just a little *too* exciting —"

Eddie rolls his eyes. "No. There's a *kuna*."

Richie squints at him. "A *what*?"

"A, what do you call it. Like a fox." Embarrassed, Eddie makes a choppy gesture with both hands, to illustrate a long animal with a tail. "But small. Fast. Steals eggs. Can't get rid of her."

The grin that stretches across Richie's face seems too wide for it.

“You’ve got eggs?” he repeats. Delighted. “You’ve got *chickens*? What, do you just leave them to run around for the whole year like—you’ve got feral chickens? Eddie—”

Eddie pinches the bridge of his nose. “No, I don’t have *feral*—of course I have someone take care of them when I’m away, I pay for—listen, it doesn’t *matter*. I have to unlock the shutters, then the well. You can, I don’t know. Unpack.”

“No, I’ll go with you,” Richie counters immediately, kicking his bag further towards the bed.

“Whatever,” Eddie says, grabbing a stool from the table.

Juggling the keys to find the right one, he gets outside, circling the house. He hears rather than sees Richie follow as he climbs the stool, balancing precariously on tiptoes to reach the top of the shutter. Something strange, like irritation or possibly an *itch* sizzles up in him. Then bursts open.

“Actually, *you* can do it,” he says. Turns. Steps down from the stool.

Richie’s eyes fly down abruptly to meet his.

*Were you looking at me?*

“You’re *tall*. You can do it,” Eddie repeats bluntly, addressing the picture of startled confusion on Richie’s face. He shoves the bunch of keys at him, then gestures up to the shutters.

Slowly, Richie glances up. “Uh, yeah, sure.”

Eddie watches him, half-overcome with an odd resentment at the ease with which he gets the hatch open. But somewhere, on the peripheries of awareness, a different thought lurks.

*Yes, you are. Were. Looking.*

*And why.*

---

In the afternoon, Richie turns to Eddie, making him look up from his newspaper.

“Is there, like,” Richie asks off-handedly, turning a pencil between his fingers. “A phone? Somewhere around here?”

Eddie considers it. “The village administrator probably has one,” he says slowly. “There’s one in town, too.”

Richie tosses the pencil in the air. “Is there a way to get into town? Bus or something?”

“Yeah, if you walk to the bus stop,” Eddie says. “Which is halfway to town.”

“Huh,” Richie says, stabbing himself accidentally with the pencil and dropping it in the grass. “Okay. Guess I’ll—”

*Don’t say it*, Eddie thinks.

"I can drive you," he says.

Instantly, Richie perks up. "Really?"

*Goddamn it.*

Eddie shrugs. "Yeah, why not. I need parts anyway. For the car."

He knows what's coming before it comes and Richie says, "You got a parts guy?"

"I do," Eddie says tersely. *Don't smile.*

Richie grins at him. "Can I meet him?"

"If you behave," Eddie says, losing the fight with the smile even as forces his eyes back onto the paper. He doesn't really know what he's reading.

He smacks the paper in the air, straightening it, and asks, a little roughly, "When do you want to go?"

---

By the time they set out for the town, it's almost eleven. *Terrible timing.* But Richie's dawdled in the morning, first refusing to get up, then attempting to grind and make coffee for them both himself, a painful operation which Eddie has watched, mouth pursed, strange fondness warring with a narrow margin of remaining patience.

And Richie has kept joking and giggling the whole way to the car, nudging Eddie's side with his elbow and making him wonder—and *isn't that all he does, really, making him think and think and think himself relentlessly to brinks of absurdity*—if he really *wants* to leave the summer house at all. But they've piled into Eddie's car anyway, Richie turning up the radio too loud and singing hoarsely over the wind as Eddie drove. And Eddie keeps catching himself wanting to smile.

And smiling.

But that's not really just Richie, is it, but something else. Something about how the road is empty, and Eddie loves driving.

At times, he'd think if he had a good car, a *proper* car—well, that'd be too much of a risk. He'd *never fucking come home*. Just drive in circles, day and night, mapping the city in his brain till there are no surprises, then moving on to another. Constantly, *constantly* moving.

"*If you goooo,*" Richie croons off-tune, "*to Saaaaaan Fraaaan-ciscooo—*"

*Like the devil was chasing you.*

---

He's still fixed on the thought as they get out of the Fiat—trembling with the impact of Richie slamming the door shut behind him—and saunter out into the town square, stuck in its midday drowsiness between the sun-doused brick and cobblestone.

“Renaissance architecture,” Eddie offers half-heartedly as they walk, gesturing to the pastel-painted townhouses, feeling a vague mortifying obligation to provide some form of cultural entertainment.

“Cool,” Richie says, disinterested.

He sticks close to Eddie, looming right over his shoulder and looking around curiously, as if wary of either the sleepy vendors under the market canopy or the few sunburnt tourists scouting for a café.

It is, Eddie thinks, mildly *grating*. How if he halted rapidly, Richie would likely come stumbling into him. How he kind of wants to test if he *would*.

They find the telephone booth relatively fast. Richie gives him thumbs-up and folds himself inside, sideways, shoulders barely contained in the narrow space of paint-smeared glass.

*Big man*, Eddie thinks. Then he tries to stop thinking.

He slinks back somewhat, not wanting to listen in on the muffled conversation. Across the square, there's a little restaurant, a few people outside drinking beer in full sunlight. For a moment, Eddie debates with himself doing something stupid. *No. Car parts. I'll get the car parts.*

Sighing involuntarily, he glances back at Richie, expecting him to be fully wrapped up in his conversation. He nearly twitches as he finds Richie's blue eyes fixed on him instead.

He's twiddling with the cord, pulling it around his finger, lips obscured by the mouthpiece as he stands tilted to the side, one shoulder pushed into the corner of the booth. He doesn't move an inch, even as Eddie looks back at him, steady on, frowning.

Richie's eyes crinkle. He smiles.

It feels like a punch. Half-sullen half-*something*, Eddie waits glued to his spot, hands in pockets and eyes on the cobblestone, till Richie is finished with his call.

---

He sleeps lightly. Fitfully. On the peripheries of awareness, he can hear small movements, shufflings, shifts.

*That damned marten*, he thinks sleepily.

Or not. Or something else. Someone. A *burglar*. A murderer. Walking in, creeping to *kill* you. Hovering over him, watching, until—

A slither of cold from the draft. Eddie shivers, drawing onto his side.

The wintry shipyard, and an illegal Springsteen bootleg recording sent by his cousin in Baltimore playing faintly as he sits in his shitty car, in his sheepskin coat, with a thermos of cardboard-flavoured tea. Waiting. A loud noise comes murmuring from the boat, gliding into the dock from Stockholm.

“Window to the world,” the conducting woman has said sarcastically as he’s approached the docking station, wide-eyed with interest. “Move aside.”

Eddie slinks to the back, watching the ship approach with a strange feeling in his gut. A vague memory comes to mind, of the day Sonia has found out Frank was gone. She never curses, but that day Eddie’s heard her clearly from his room, shouting into the receiver,

*“Fuck your fucking America!”*

The memory changes again, shifts.

“Come back, come *back* to me,” Sonia begging, voice watery, taking him by the face.

Or is it Maria? Yes, in the old chapel, in the pearl-embroidered dress from her dowry. Everything is blurry, even her features under the wedding veil. But the church is cold, air sickly with incense. Everyone is dressed in black. *The coffin is waiting and so are the nails*, someone whispers, right by Eddie’s ear. *Better run now.*

He wrenches himself away.

---

When he wakes up, he can’t catch his breath. His eyes are wet.

It takes a while for his heart to calm down enough to notice the *quiet* of the house. Pushed into motion by a strange nervous feeling, still only half-awake, Eddie gets up and makes his wobbly way through the kitchen. He pauses before the door to the veranda, hesitant, heart racing. The he inches it open.

The bed is empty. No bag. No *one*.

*Of course, fuck, of course he’s gone.* He’s suddenly sick with nerves. *I’m the last fucking idiot on earth. He probably wasn’t even really a—*

There’s a scraping of the key, then a low whine of un-oiled hinges. The sturdy front door swings open, and Richie sneaks in.

Eddie’s stomach lurches.

“Oh,” he says, weakly, before he thinks. “You’re here. I, uh. Great.”

At the sound of Eddie’s voice, Richie almost trips, looking around wildly like a startled hare. At the *sight* of Eddie, he visibly relaxes.

“Huh? Oh, *hi*,” he says, as though mercifully oblivious to Eddie’s overwhelming, incriminating relief. He seems agitated himself. “Didn’t think you’d be up yet. Listen, you won’t believe this.”

“Huh?” Eddie manages, clutching at the doorframe to steady himself.

“*Dude*,” Richie says. He shucks off his leather jacket and tosses it onto his unmade bed. He is wearing another glaringly colourful shirt underneath, with something like red flowers on it. “Has there been like a cataclysm here or something? I went to that shop we passed on the way here and I couldn’t get anything, they say they take dollars but—”

Eddie boggles his eyes out at him.

The memory of the local shop flashes in his mind: a relentlessly scowling woman behind the till, red cellophane letters spelling out *THE LEADERSHIP CARES FOR THE CIVILIANS* plastered to the white-tile wall. Empty freezer, empty shelves.

“You,” he says, cutting Richie off, “you tried to pay with *dollars* at the shop?”

“Yeah, I mean I—”

“Are you fucking *insane*? Did you tell everyone where you live as well? Did you give them your keys?” Eddie cuts him off, voice rising. “Do you *want* to get robbed? Jesus Christ, I turn away for five seconds—”

Richie raises his hands defensively. “Dude, I just wanted to buy some food! But fuck, even then, you like—can’t fucking buy anything there? There’s nothing in that shop. Like literally. They just had bread and vodka. I’m not even making this shit up, they literally said they can give me *bread or vodka*—”

Eddie blurts, “I’m sorry, what *else* did you expect?”

“Anything?” Richie’s voice grows higher in pitch. “Normal food?”

Eddie sighs. Closes his eyes.

“You can’t just go to a shop and buy things,” he says, tiredly.

“But,” Richie counters, “that’s like the definition of a shop. A place you go to buy things.”

Eddie runs a hand across his face, “Yeah, not ... not here. I brought some food, the rest I know where to get. But don’t do shit like that, this isn’t fucking America.”

Then, because it’s early, and he’s had no coffee yet, and he’s not *thinking*, he is never fucking thinking, Eddie says, “Fuck, you scared me. I thought you ran away.”

There’s a pause.

“What?” Richie says. Then, “Eddie. *Eds*.”

Voice soft. Amused.

Eddie glares at him.

“Thought I stole your beautiful car?” Richie croons after him, as he turns away and retreats into the kitchen. He follows. “Your attic pest? Whatever else I can carry from here?”

“No, I just thought you left,” Eddie says shortly.

Strange silence.

Not bearing to wait for a response, he moves ungainly towards the counter, feet bare on the wood. He's desperate to get his hands on Frank's coffee machine, get *away* from Richie's eyes, which keep following him curiously. *Why do you keep. Looking. At me.*

He realises suddenly he's never let himself be witnessed this discomposed by a stranger before: ratty clothes, unshaved, unbalanced. The thought sends a shock through his nerve endings. He busies his nervous hands with coffee.

*What does it matter.*

"I didn't run away," Richie points out, suddenly close. Eddie's eyes snap up. Richie has followed him into the kitchen, meek, quieter than expected. He's hovering by the counter now.

Distracted, Eddie rubs the bridge of his nose again. Looks down.

"I know now," he says curtly. "It doesn't matter."

Richie circles the wooden counter and leans on it, elbows boxed on Eddie's two sides, watching him grind the coffee.

At length, he picks up, amiably, "Kinda just wanted to do something nice for you."

Eddie's thoughts screech to a halt. "What?"

"Like, make you a nice breakfast or something. American breakfast, shit, I don't know. Pancakes?"

"Pancakes," Eddie repeats, dully. For a moment, he stands motionless by the counter, in his worn sleep T-shirt, blinking at Richie to the intermittent staccato rhythm of Frank's percolator.

"You don't need to," he says at last, as the machine clicks off and powers down. "But thank you."

"No, man, thank you for letting me crash here," Richie smiles at him. "Seriously."

*It's too early for this*, Eddie thinks, sourly, pouring his coffee. He's glad he has something to look at other than Richie's hands clasped together on the counter. *I have a whole day to get through and I already feel like I'm going fucking insane.*

"Yeah," he says instead, and buries his nose in the coffee mug. He nearly burns himself.

"Next time you want something better to eat—*tell* me," he mutters, muffled. "I know people to go to. I have some stamps left for, like, chocolate or shit. I'll get eggs and milk. And if you want meat, I have a guy—"

"You have a *meat* guy?" Richie cuts in, delighted. "Like the parts guy, earlier? Can I meet *him*?"

Eddie glares. "No."

"*Boo*," Richie says. "Also, don't fucking worry, dude. I'll get by without my waffles and caviar just fine."

Suddenly, impulsively, Eddie has an idea.

“You want something nice?” he asks, sharp. “Desert, something sweet? I can give you sweet. But it takes work.”

The half-curious half-wary look of utter incomprehension on Richie’s face is almost worth the embarrassment of the morning. Eddie almost smiles.

“The fuck does *that* mean?” Richie asks. “What *work*?”

“It means get some sleep today, you’ll be getting up early tomorrow,” Eddie tells him, setting down his mug.

“To do what?”

“Sightseeing,” Eddie says cryptically as he heads for the pantry. “For now you’ll have to make do with my plain old breakfast.”

---

To get to the orchard, you had to go through the forest first, its meandering half-overgrown path.

A bird trills close by, sharp and high-pitched.

“You eat mushrooms too, right?” Richie asks, poking something—a lonesome chanterelle sprouted early, likely spurred on by the heavy rainfall in the second half of June. “All the funky weird little ... things.”

“Don’t pick anything!” Eddie says on instinct, swivelling sharply around. He swats the stick out of Richie’s surprised hands. “Don’t even touch them! You know nothing about mushrooms. You eat this, you will *die*.”

Richie gives a little laugh, like Eddie’s said something funny. But he drops the stick, tucking his hands back into his pockets, so Eddie turns away and picks up his pace.

Richie, who seems to have never been in a forest in his life. Who Eddie had had to threaten into wearing layers, shielding his head.

“Dude,” he’s said, wincing, as Eddie shoved his windbreaker and cap at him. “It’s like a million fucking degrees outside.”

“These are full of ticks,” Eddie’s shot back, indicating the forest with a broad gesture, “You don’t want a fucking tick. I sure won’t get it out of you.”

“No one’s asking you,” Richie has told him, but he put on his baseball cap. Then he has said, “That’s funniest word in the world.”

*Kleszcz*. Tick.

Something stuck in your skin. Might make you go insane. Sometimes lethal.



---

Then, up a hillside. Cut across a wheat field belonging to no one, and there it is. As if hidden from intrusive eyes and hands. Sleepy, gnarled old cherry trees, a few apples and pears. Most eaten through by worms and wasps, ripe to excess, unshielded by any too complex chemistry.

The orchard belongs to old family friends. Supposedly. Eddie's memories of them are cloudy and superimposed with Frank's quiet, haunting presence, as if extracted straight from childhood. *Frank's* friends, then, and Eddie's *something*. Long-lost tether to a different reality. Sonia never talked about Frank except in her shaky anger, and so all of Eddie's assumptions revolve around the small dichotomy: the fuzzy happiness in which he'd spent his early childhood, then *crash*, its harsh condemnation.

He didn't get to know *family friends* until years later, running away for the first time, chased out from home by a desperation too frightening to pick apart. He wandered the forest aimlessly for hours on end, trying to gentle the wild animal in his head somehow, appease it with some foreign silence. He was scrawny, thin, insomniac. Had already started his job, already met Maria. Wanted a decision he couldn't bring himself to make. Smokes nervously after dark and then feels sick with himself till morning. Lonely.

His legs carried him, unawares, to the fence hugging the orchard. *Muscle memory?*

A woman with a basket.

"Why, isn't that Kasprzak's boy," she said, wonderingly, and he was thrown by the warmth of her voice. "Eddie, huh? *Look* how you've grown. You used to be *this* small." She puts the hand with the pruning shears to her hipbone to indicate.

"And running around everywhere, fast like the devil was chasing you. Always moving. *Come*, come on in."

She opened the gate, and Eddie thought she must surely get splinters in her calloused swarthy hands from the carious wood.

She led him, mostly quiet and nervously stymied, through rows of trees. Talked about the past, less fuzzy than in Eddie's memories, less childishly soft, more tangible. A memory rather than a dream. Someone else's memory. She mentioned Frank, mentioned Eddie.

"*Sweet child*," she said, though Eddie knew he hadn't been.

He left strangely moved. As if hollowed out, and carrying a basket of apples. Boiken, *late bloomers*, *good for apple pie*.

"Come back whenever," she told him. "In summer we have cherries. They'll go to waste if someone doesn't pick them, I have no nerves for it anymore."

It was November, he'd just turned twenty-four.

---

July, now. Hot (*like a million fucking degrees*). Air thick and dizzy-sweet, almost cloying with ripening cherries. Sunlight lashing at the skin even now in early morning. To get through the forest, you layer up. And then you shuck the layers, one by one, to bear walking out into the sun-drenched orchard.

He shoots a sideways, half-involuntary glance at Richie, tall and awkward, staggering in place as he tries to yank his Old Navy hoodie off over his head. The yellow T-shirt he wears underneath rides up over his stomach.

Peeling his eyes away, suddenly annoyed, Eddie levers himself over the fence and jumps inside. *Splinters*. The heels of his hands sting sharply. *Fucking. Stupid*. He wipes them on his trousers.

“C’mon,” he throws across his shoulder, gruffly. “We want to get this done before sundown.”

“Yessir,” Richie snipes back at him, cheery, saluting awkwardly as he hikes one leg over the fence, then other. Like there’s barely a fence.

Eddie feels angry.

He scans the orchard dizzily and centers on a promising tree. Levering himself up against the bark, he places one hand on a sturdy branch, steadying. He feels Richie’s eyes on him. *Infuriating*.

“What are you looking at,” Eddie says.

“Is my job here to catch you when you fall?” Richie asks, mildly.

“No,” Eddie bites out, casting him an irritated glance. “You can reach just fine on your own, get to work.”

---

He’s saying, face lit up in half-disgust half-delight, “You drank *iodine*? That’s disgusting.”

Eddie scowls. “More disgusting than dying in agony from radiation sickness?”

“Okay, slow down, Marie Curie,” Richie interjects, stopping in place. The brim of his hat is hiding his face even more, already shadowed by the dimmed light of the forest. “It’s not like you were there on the front—“

“First of all,” Eddie cuts him off, drawing to a reluctant halt. “There was a radioactive cloud—“

Richie starts laughing again.

“Stop,” Eddie snaps. He’s feeling strange, tense but disoriented, as if dizzied by heat or effort. Even in the cool shadow, his skin keep insisting it feels the sunlight. *Burning, burning up*.

*Till there’s nothing left.*

He inhales sharply, “Stop fucking *laughing* at me.”

“I’m not laughing at you,” Richie says counters, the laughter cutting off rapidly.

“I’m not,” he repeats, at Eddie’s silence.

Not quite silence, everything around them is full of stymied noise. Woodpeckers. A trill of a songbird, but Eddie’s never learned to distinguish the sounds of birds. A dry crack of a twig under the sole of your shoes.

“I think it’s cute,” Richie picks up, unexpectedly. He reaches up to scratch his head under the cap, giving Eddie an irrational urge of inspecting him for lice. “You know? Real fucking cute, when you say these things. You get so intense cause you, like, care about shit. It’s *cute*.”

Eddie has no idea what to do with this information. The burning after-feeling is somehow worse now. *Better. Different. Worse.*

“I’m not fucking *cute*,” he says at last, gruffly, picking up his pace and stepping forward. *Well, aren’t you a ray of sunshine.*

“Cute,” Richie says brightly, just to be contrary, and catches up with two long strides.

“You are so annoying.”

Richie bows to him, obnoxious and over-exaggerated like a bad stage actor. Looking at him sideways, Eddie clenches his jaw.

He has an urge, suddenly, he wants to—to do something *childish*, maybe. Take advantage of the fact Richie’s bent forward this way, grab him by the shoulders and charge full force. Tackle him to the ground, push back against the fragrant earth and low shrubbery. Crawl over him, victorious.

Then—*unclear. Fuzzy.*

He doesn’t really want to punch Richie. *No.*

He thinks maybe he just wants to solve him. Wants a better look. Or maybe something else. Maybe he’d know if he did it, then he’d know. *Maybe.*

But Richie is holding the woodsplint basket, *łubianka*, rocking it slightly as he walks with a spring in his step, heavy with cherries. To spill them would be a waste.

“Come on,” Eddie says. “Let’s get back.”

---

He’s still restless, even as Richie announces he’s wiped and doesn’t intend to do anything else for the rest of the day, so he makes work for himself and puts up the hammock, tying it between the bark of the spruce and the bar of the well.

Having secured the knots, he cautiously lowers himself onto the coarse linen, testing the give. It holds, surprisingly comfortable, and quite against his will, Eddie exhales and letting his muscles loosen. Richie has set up camp lower down in the garden, typewriter and notes scattered intimidatingly across the garden table. He's then proceeded to doze off in his foldable chair, mouth open, head tilted to the side in the uneven shadow of the tree.

Eddie lies watching him through half-lidded eyes, arms crossed on his chest, for an indeterminate amount of time. *Strange man*. Then closes his eyes, thoughts drifting. *Strange situation*. Something is making noise in the branches, indistinct, and distantly he wonders—

*Tap.*

Eddie scrunches up his nose as a something sharp and lightweight hits him between the eyes. He gropes at his face and crumples a small paper plane in his hand.

"What are you, *twelve*?" he croaks out, sullen. His throat is awfully dry, skin flushed from warmth, a cloying drowsy taste in his mouth. He's drifted off, and somewhere along the way the sky dipped downwards on the skyline, spilling over him again.

"Sorry to interrupt you working on your tan," Richie's voice comes drifting, amused. "But I think if you keep at it much longer, you'll give yourself brain damage."

Eddie raises himself up slightly and squints at him across the garden—he's sitting with his elbows propped up on the table, chin in his hands.

"Thank you for your concern," Eddie tells him bluntly, and swings his legs off the hammock. Richies's *right*, is the thing. It's irritating. He shouldn't have fallen asleep.

"Hey, how d'you learn English?"

The question is unexpected enough do draw Eddie's attention to him again.

"Books, mostly," he says at length, rubbing at one of his eyes. He's sluggish now, limbs and head sleep-heavy. He wants to lay back down and drift off-again. "Some lessons at school, but few and badly done. But I read a lot as a kid. And listened to the radio. Learned how to hack into the Western stations."

"You must be real fucking smart," Richie says.

"Don't sound so fucking *surprised*," Eddie shoots back at him, scowling. Richie laughs. Afternoon-honeyed sun glints off the frames of his glasses. There's a page tucked into his typewriter, with something printed across it. But from a distance, Eddie can't see.

"What'd you read?" he asks curiously, like this is really a topic worth abandoning his script for. Eddie hollows out one cheek, shifting in the hammock. Then jerks his head to the side, indicating the house.

"Science-fiction, mostly. There's a whole shelf of them in there. Lem, Dick, Asimov," Eddie says. "Bradbury. Le Guin. Whatever I could get my hands on."

"Something to analyse here," Richie mutters.

Eddie doesn't comment.

---

It's a tactical mistake, having Richie sleep in the veranda, even if Eddie doesn't know how he could've avoided it. Every morning, in order to leave, he has to walk through the room, passing by the sleeping Richie and telling himself not to stop and take a look.

*Privacy*, he reminds himself. Richie's face seems softer in sleep.

---

And then one day, on his cursory way back to the house in the morning, he walks in on Richie already awake, sitting up in his bed with his head in his hands.

Richie looks up instantly, startled. He looks exhausted.

"Sorry," Eddie says, unsure how to word it, knowing the words come out stilted and half-hostile.

"Are you, uh. Alright?"

He doesn't know how to be nurturing, he doesn't know why he feels like this situation requires it. The urge alone makes his skin crawl.

"I'm fine," Richie responds. Something harsh in it, too. Defensive, as if he's picking up Eddie's smothering instincts and fighting against them. Eddie tries not to think of it, instead busying his hands with work, and stitching his attention to it.

*You have to do it properly. Better to use the finer cherries, the dark ones. Better picked straight from the trees, old cherry trees.*

There's a lull of silence. He finishes rinsing the fruit and put it back in the basket.

*One and a half kilo cherries. Two hundred milliliters boiled water.*

He tries to banish the prickly urge to shy and stash himself away somewhere. Not let it cut deeper than the surface skin.

He's still waiting on the car, when they've spoken on the phone, from his and Maria's flat, Roman's said he wouldn't get it down there till Thursday. But it doesn't mean he has to be idle. He's got time to kill. Time that doesn't need being spent catastrophizing over having potentially abandoning the frail axis of his already fractured facsimile of a life. And for what.

*Five hundred milliliters of spirit, ninety-six percent alcohol. Half a kilo sugar. Wash and stone the cherries.*

He wipes his hands, then throws the cotton cloth over the woodsplint basket. And for what? To invite a stranger into his house, and feel like he's losing his mind. *This arrangement*, Eddie tells himself deliberately, *was never aimed at finding companionship*. It's just—

*A test?* he thinks. *An experiment*. In pushing at his own boundaries.

Well, it can be an experiment in respecting someone else's.

It's fine. He *can* be alone. He knows how to be alone. There's always work if you want to find it. He can get this place up and running. He gets the stoner out of the cupboard and heaves up the basket. He'll go work in the shed, set up the radio. Give his *stranger* some space.

*Should've given him more space in the first place*, he thinks, troubled, not really knowing where or how. Unless he moved out, there wasn't more *space* at all.

Heading out, he tries to move through the veranda even quicker and more noiseless. Transparent. Eyes turned away from Richie's nook, as not to be intrusive.

A sudden voice startles him, "Hey, uh—Eddie."

Eddie stops on the threshold. Turns.

Richie is sitting up on the bed, one knee drawn up to his chest, a script tucked to his chest, dressed in a T-shirt and grey sweatpants. He looks pale and tired, like he hasn't slept. Or slept *badly*. Illogically contrite.

"Sorry I snapped at you," he says. Sounds exhausted, too. "Just."

He pauses, as if losing track of his thought. Eddie waits in silence.

"I'm shit company today anyway," Richie says at length, awkwardly. He winces. "Sorry, don't mind me. Should just shut it. Sorry."

*Thin the spirit with water, ninety down to seventy percent*.

"That's fine," Eddie says, knowing it sounds awful. Not knowing what else he could say without sounding like too much.

"Yeah, I'll just stay here and get as much writing done as I can," Richie goes on, voice still muffled, but somewhat less strained. "If you don't mind."

Eddie blinks. He can feel the waking sunlight lick at his neck from the outside, one of the birds already trilling its lungs hoarse outside. *Warm day*. But it's been raining at night, and the air is fresh and humid.

"I don't mind," he says simply. "You can do what you want here, Richie. You can stay in bed for all I care. You know where the kitchen is. Feel at home. I'll be in the garage, if you change your mind."

*Change your mind about what?*

But it's too late, he's already said it. He's turning away now, and rushing down the steps into the dewy morning.

---

The door to the shed swings open with a low whine. Eddie feels a sharp tug of surprise, but carefully doesn't look up. He's occupied.

"Thought you wanted to write the whole day."

It comes out strangely probing, accusatory. As if he's been caught red-handed. *Caught doing what? Thinking.*

*About you.*

Richie shrugs, shuffling inside slow and curious like a particularly big stray cat. "Need inspiration."

His voice sounds normal now, more of its usual volume and pitch. Irrationally, Eddie feels relieved.

"You expect to find it here?" he asks, eyebrow arching.

In lieu of a response, Richie nods at his red-stained hands.

"Who'd you cut up, Doctor K?"

*Put the cherries in a jar and soak them in alcohol.*

Eddie throws him a look. "Wouldn't you like to know."

Taking it as an invitation enough, Richie grabs one of the foldable chairs propped against the garage wall and tugged it up to the other side of Eddie's work station. He snatches one of the already-stoned cherries and puts it in his mouth before Eddie can to bat his hands away.

He scrunches up his face. "*Sour.*"

"Yeah, they will be, genius," Eddie tells him. "Until you make the syrup and mix it."

*Leave them in a dark warm place for six weeks. Check on the jar occasionally, shake it to stir. After six weeks, pour it in a bottle. Coat the remaining cherries in the jar with sugar.*

"You sit here often, brewing cherry poison?" Richie quizzes, licking the corner of his mouth clean.

"It's good for you," Eddie counters, going back to his task.

Richie laughs, "Shut up, it's not."

"No, it is," Eddie says earnestly. "In reasonable doses. It's old medicine—good for the heart and circulation. Regulates sodium levels and blood pressure. And it's rich in magnesium, strengthens the veins and arteries."

"Okay, Doctor K," Richie says, raising his hands in defeat. He kept smiling. "No complaints. Dose me with the good stuff."

He reaches for the already filled jar. Eddie smacks his hands away.

Light falls in, splintered, through the cracks in the garage roof and the half-penetrable window. Richie starts smiling.

“It’s not ready,” Eddie says. “It won’t be ready for months. Patience.”

*Throughout the next days, the sugar will melt, slowly, to become the syrup. When it’s done, mix it with the alcohol. Careful, pouring over the cherries.*

“You’re not patient,” Richie points out in a whisper, as if revealing a secret to Eddie.

“I *can* be patient,” Eddie says. There’s something charged in the sentence that he hasn’t planned, halted. Ready to fire.

He feels Richie’s eyes follow his eyes as he works.

“Months?” he repeats. A little wistfully.

“A *month* at least,” Eddie says. “To be good, it should lie for a year.”

Richie visibly pouts, plucking at the strap of the old guitar in the corner, then picking up one of Eddie’s spanners from the toolbox by the table and fiddles with it.

“Psh. I thought we were going to drink it,” he says. “You promised me sweet stuff.”

“We can drink last year’s.”

Richie tosses the spanner back into the toolbox. “You have a *stash*? A cellar? And yet you made me do all this hard work—”

“It’ll do you good to *do* some work from time to time,” Eddie says dismissively. “And the point of having a stash is that it needs being replenished.”

“How conscientious,” Richie says, delighted. “So, secret cellar? Bottom of the well? Or the attic for your enemies?”

Eddie sighs heavily, rolling his eyes. “No. It’s in the kitchen. I make it whenever I’m here.”

There’s a pause.

“I like doing it,” he adds, not knowing why, “I like the process.”

But Richie sits by Eddie’s scraped old work counter padded with cherry-red newspapers now, with his chin in his hands, looking up at him with wide attentive eyes, like Eddie’s saying something quite compelling rather than a string of inane nonsense about brewing contraband alcohol in his garage like half the country.

Oddly flustered, he turns his eyes away.

*Pour the liquid in bottles and leave it to lie. Be patient. It’s sweet in the end.*

---



Days tick by, hour by sunny hour.

Eddie's tension grows, somehow. It sleeps and wakes with him, and sticks close under the skin during the day. He dreams short restless dreams at night, that he doesn't remember in the morning.

But he knows there's something in them that there *shouldn't* be.

---

The question is fairly straightforward, "And you wouldn't mind? If they came over?"

"No," Eddie says, thinking, on instinct, that he does. The prickly feeling is back, strengthened. *Don't look at me, don't find me.* "Whatever. Call them, invite over. Just let me know when."

He picks up the waves of anticipation coming from Richie throughout the whole week till Wednesday, a restlessness making him even less focused on his writing than usually. And quieter.

*He's sick of this*, Eddie thinks, up on the ladder cleaning out the gutters of the house. *Me. He feels trapped. He's looking for an out.*

*Did I want to trap him here?*

Eventually he thinks he'll think himself into insanity, if he doesn't acknowledge it.

"I can, like, stay in," he blurts out in the evening, approaching Richie. It's a rare cold day, sky grey and overcast, and Richie's wearing his sweats, stretched in the hammock and scrawling something unintelligible on the old battered script, grimacing intermittently.

"Wha—?" he says, distracted, eyes flying up to Eddie who stands next to the hammock.

His hands are fisted in pockets. "When your friends come tomorrow. Don't worry about me. If you—I can like, clean the attic. It needs doing anyway. Or I'll go round to the town to look for parts. Not a problem. Just so know."

Richie looks up at him, wide-eyed, a very strange expression. *Scared? Caught red-handed? His plan see-through.* Eddie tries to look steadfast, and not defeated.

Sonia's voice, *Go make yourself scarce.*

Then,

"Do you not—" Richie hesitates, suddenly uncharacteristically bashful. "Do you not want to meet them? I know I'm, like, *a lot* and they probably seem—but they're my friends, they're cool. I swear."

Eddie feels like the conversation has taken a rapid swerve in a wildly unplanned direction.

"No, I," he manages, blinking. "I'd like to. Just, you know. In case you don't want me here."

Richie's eyes widen even more, and Eddie has to stop himself from wincing at his own words.

“Dude, they’re like all coming here to meet you,” Richie says, wrenching the metaphorical steering wheel permanently from Eddie’s grip. “They’re probably glad to be rid of me for the time being, they have me all the time. *And* they’d probably think I made you up if you left now.”

*You talk about me?* is Eddie’s first stupid thought.

*Stupid.* Of course he’d tell—his *friends*. That he’s gone to live with a stranger for two months. Of course. But still.

*Still.*

“Oh,” he says. The burning feeling is back, but changed. As if external, radiating out of his skin instead of keeping contained. His face feels hot. “Oh, okay. I’ll stay then.”

“Cool,” Richie says, somewhat stiffly.

Eddie nods and forces himself to walk away, aiming vaguely for the garage.

---

He has another dream but it’s too strange to dwell on. Richie’s standing on the pavement under his block, shouting something Eddie can’t make out, hands tunnelled around his face like a megaphone.

From the balcony, Maria throws plate after plate of painted china. They shatter on the ground.

---

A car turns into the provisional driveway.

Red convertible, long, swerving down the curve of the narrow trodden path, cutting sharp through the yellow rapeseed. Someone standing up. A woman in a blue sundress, red-haired, waving at Richie, who’s squeezing out of the gate, waving back with his arm raised high up. He laughs. Someone, a man in a checked-flannel, is shouting, *HEY RICH! IT’S BIG RICH!*

Methodically, Eddie pushes the gate all the way open, so the latch fits snug against the dusty dark hazelnut that hunches over the fence. He holds himself back in the shadow for a moment longer, waiting, looking out into the field like at a slide in a projector.

*Scene: Richie skids up to the parked car. The woman’s pale freckly arms come around him, someone else, a man in sunglasses, tugging him down for a hug. Pretty picture. Sun-hazy. Full of laughter. Eddie watches, swallowing. Like a movie. If he holds completely still and stays there and looks, he can almost forget he’s there.*

Richie turns, face lit up with laughter, and beckons at him. *EDDIE*, he mouths, someone’s elbow round his neck. Wide crooked grin. *COME HERE.*

Eddie lets go of the gate and steps out into the sunlight.

---

They're loud, yes, and a little obnoxious. A *lot* obnoxious, sat around the table Eddie and Richie pushed to the center of the garden, laughing and talking over each other. They are also more like Richie than Eddie has thought. Warmer. *Likeable*.

"This is Eddie Kasprzak," Richie has announced lazily as he'd come up to the car, in this strange nasally voice of his that shouldn't really be endearing. He threw an arm around Eddie, pulling him into a gruff side-hug.

"Kasprzak," Eddie has corrected him, terse.

"Psh," Richie has repeated at him, pouting. "*Psh*."

*Shut up*, Eddie has thought.

"Nice to meet you, Eddie Kasprzak," the possibly quietest of Richie's friends, dressed in a woollen cardigan, has said then, extending a polite hand. Stanley Uris, the producer. Looking at Eddie with either suspicion or interest—*neither* reassuring—through shrewd blue eyes. In his deadpan voice, he's picked up, "I've heard a—"

But he's been interrupted by a burst of noise from Bill, the other screenwriter, shorter than Eddie and laughing at something Mike has been saying in a low voice, bent over the car hood with an enigmatic smile.

*Mike. And Ben, and Beverly.*

Actors, you can tell, they're beautiful. *Stupid* beautiful. In a different way than most people are, different than ... than *Richie*, who's something else. Else but maybe better. *Closer*. That's what Eddie thinks, anyway, his thoughts hazy and circular and *cherry-sticky* after a few shots, vision softened round the edges. Yes, *Beverly is beautiful but Richie is tall*. Big smile, soft hands. Scruffy. *And he—*

Richie throws his head back and swallows down the cherry vodka, hands stuck under the table. When he spits out the glass onto the table, his mouth is red-stained. Eddie stares at him, and then he *looks away*, cutting the thought in half.

Across the table, Beverly is watching him. *Again*. Throughout the entire dinner, the *entire evening*, Eddie knows he's being intently watched, even if he doesn't quite understand why. But he feels her perceptive and lingering eyes on him, and still he can't bring himself to give enough of a damn to keep his own eyes from Richie.

*Let me have this*, he thinks, only half-knowing what he means by it. *Just now. Just once.*

He avoids her eyes, now, and gazes up at the house, assessing it hazily. *I need to clean the chimney or there'll be nests. I need to—*

But the thought refuses to formulate itself. His pulse is quickened, approaching feverish under the itching collar of his jacket. He tugs at it nervously.

“Hey, Eddie,” it’s Mike, in his low, smooth voice, “are these pears you’ve got there ‘round the house? What’s that, an orchard?”

*Oh distraction. Good.*

“Yeah, uh, used to be, long ago—not much left now, my dad’s put a fence around the plot years back,” Eddie says carefully, glancing up at Mike. “And anyway, it’s been left unworked for too long, s’all ... you know. How do you say it, all *tangled* now, overgrown.”

An idea sprouts in his mind. “Do you wanna come see?”

“Sure,” Mike says, getting up from the table.

Briefly, Eddie thinks he catches Richie’s eyes following them mid-conversation, but he doesn’t stop to make sure. He’s burning up as it is.

He leads Mike away from the table instead, behind the house where the garden is sunk in comforting shadow and the air is thinner and cooler to breathe with.

Eddie exhales, relieved, and picks up talking.

“I don’t actually *know* much,” he says quickly, shooting Mike a timid smile, “I’m just kind of hanging out here whenever I can, doing what little I can. But I know I’m letting it go to waste, really. It needs work, I’d have to rework the whole thing. There used to be—see there? Rosebushes, for instance, down there, but—they’d need to be wrapped up, to—”

“Overwinter, yeah,” Mike says quietly, crouching down and touching the earth by the wispy pear trees. “I expect it gets cold here later in the year. It’s good soil, though” he mutters approvingly, crushing it between his thumb and forefinger. “*Does* need work but if you wanted, you could have good yield here.”

He straightens up, dusting off his hands. “I grew up on a farm. Mostly helped out with the animals, but we had an orchard too. Best place.”

“Yeah,” Eddie says. “Yeah, I can imagine.”

*Mike, he thinks, is gentle and thoughtful and both very much unlike Richie and, strangely, similarly—*

*Similarly what?* He thinks, futile, upset at his own inability to push the thought to the end. *Mike is really tall.*

They continue the walk round the house in companionable silence, then head back to the front of the garden, where Eddie can hear Beverly and Richie laugh.

---

When they emerge from behind the house, Mike pats him lightly on the shoulder and goes to get himself a drink. Pursing his lips into something-not-quite-a-smile, Eddie hangs back, lowering himself to sit on the lowest step of the stairs. Reaching to the pocket of his jacket, he fishes out his clandestine cigarette and lighter.

Click, *fire*.

Oozing synth-heavy music comes rippling through the darkened air, spilling out of Stanley's expensive-looking speaker. He, Bill and Mike are talking, stretched out lazily on the chairs with the remaining alcohol. On the grass behind the table, Richie's dancing with Bev.

Eddie takes a drag, hidden away, *looking*.

Discordant, somewhat clumsy. Movements colliding with the music instead of going along with it. Bev raises her arms over her head, and Richie twirls her around—*her blue polkadot skirt and his awful mustard yellow shirt*—then dips her low, almost to the grass. A burst of laughter. And as he pulls her back to her feet, Eddie can swear, even across the dark air, that she looks at him across her shoulder. She shoves at Richie, then, playful, and goes swaying towards Ben who's dozing in the hammock.

Turning his head, Eddie finds Richie already looking at him, a hazy bright look on his face.

Smiling, he stumbles across the grass towards the stairs. A moment, and Eddie feels himself jostled lightly towards the railing as Richie folds himself—lanky limbs, shoulders and all—next to him. Cigarettes, cologne, and sweat. Hints of cherry and alcohol on his breath. *Richie smell*, Eddie thinks. *Nice? No, not really. But also yes. Yes.*

Not knowing what to do, Eddie blows out smoke at him; Richie scrunches up his nose.

*Don't stop smiling.*

"Think I had a bit too much of your cherry poison," Richie says, voice slightly slurred.

*Don't stop smiling.*

"So predictable," Eddie tells him. Richie, finally, smiles wide, then reaches over.

He plucks the cigarette out of Eddie's hand, clumsy fingers colliding with his hand, and takes a drag himself. Eddie's jaw tightens.

"So what'd you *think*, Mr. Host," Richie mutters, indicating the table with a jerk of head. "D'you like them?"

"Yeah," Eddie says, eyes flicking back to Bev and Ben, now lying tangled together in a hammock. Stanley is tinkering with his radio, Mike saying something again, making Bill laugh so hard he nearly chokes.

Stymied, Eddie adds, "Yeah, *'course* I do."

"Good," Richie says. He presses his shoulder harder into Eddie's. "I like *you*. You know?"

*Drunk*, Eddie thinks, feeling warm. *You're so drunk*. Eddie isn't, not quite, but it feels close. At length, he reaches up, and slowly, cautiously detracts his cigarette from Richie's idle hand. He looks him in the face.

"Good," Eddie tells Richie, shortly.

Richie snorts, as if surprised. *Yes. Yes, keep smiling.*

"Nothing else?" he croaks out.

Instead of answering, Eddie gets up to his feet. This way, he's taller than Richie for once, and Richie tilts his head back to look up at him. For a moment, Eddie lingers, suspended between action and indecision. Feeling out of breath, though he doesn't know why.

"Stick around," he says at last, stilted, snuffing out the cigarette on the railing and conscientiously avoiding Richie's hazy-blue eyes, "then maybe you'll find out."

---

They leave after the evening dies out, the car shying into the pitch-black distance, the bright red of the paint barely even a colour. Eddie stands leaning heavily on the gate, staring after fading two dim lights.

Richie has gone up to the house—illuminated from within like a lighthouse in the cricket-strident night—outlining his tall, swaying figure with a warm sheen as he stopped briefly in the doorway, throwing a hazy last glance backwards.

He doesn't emerge again after that, and Eddie pictures him falling fast and deep asleep, stretched across the bed in the veranda, glasses askew, under a bunched up blanket.

He shakes his head. *Strange feeling.*

His throat feels tight, as if from strain of holding something back. But what? Strange, *hollow* feeling, mostly, a negative space pushing at his ribs from the inside as if to wrench itself free. *The house will be full of mosquitoes*. He should go close the door, flung open to let in the night wind. He should lock the gate.

But he can't move. Richie would be sleeping there, and he'll have to walk past him, again, but this time feeling choked and frightened, eyes down on the floor. *Strange feeling.*

He realises suddenly his eyes are wet, a hot, prickly sensation, and is suddenly ashamed.

"What the fuck," Eddie whispers to himself, pushing the back of his right hand into his eyes. The hand is trembling. He pulls at the gate with the other, drawing it closed. "What the *fuck*."

*E. Kasprzak* from the engraving on the door has never been someone who cries. Or someone who feels much at all, not for most of the time—except, at times, this futile abject *anger*. But mostly, he'd just get so tired. Tired to the bones.

And now, suddenly, there it is.

He locks the gate, and turns to face the house. The wind picks up, sending the long branches of the chestnut and pine into movement, an avalanche of rustling noise.

So maybe he hasn't understood, till now. How cold he's grown, serving his life like a sentence, and how numb he's grown to the cold.

*When you freeze, it doesn't hurt after a time. Like falling asleep.*

Then suddenly, a sudden prickle of warmth, a borrowed sense of belonging. And suddenly everything. Suddenly he feels like he's been cheated out of something.

Slowly, Eddie starts walking towards the house.

He's always known, distantly, that he is lonely. He is used to the feeling of it, a stifling silence in his head that clings, frightened, to newer and newer distractions. In work, in keeping his hands full. But he's never quite known how to want something else. What else to want.

---

"I'm going to pray for you," she says in the dream, almost sobbing.

Eddie throws the plate. It crashes. A million little pieces, sharp, cutting.

He says, "*Kurwa, powodzenia.*"

*Good fucking luck.*

---

## **II. THEN BURN THE HOUSE DOWN TO FULFIL THE PREDICTION**

### **JANUARY 1991**

Patty is waiting outside the studio, wrapped in her big fluffy fur coat.

It's snowing, dense soft snowflakes swathing the world in a haze of indefinite white.

"Sorry to keep you so long," Eddie says, fishing in his pocket for the car keys.

Patty shakes her head.

"I'm not going to complain for having a chauffeur. You wanna come round for dinner? I baked *knysze* yesterday," she asks, warmly. "And don't even try to pretend you've eaten already. Now I was never a

fan of Maria, but at least she fed you. And I *know* you work himself to death here *and* in the garage now. You look, and I mean this with love, like you're one leg in the grave already, Eddie."

Eddie snorts.

"I can't," he says. He smiles at her frown, "Thank you, but I *really* can't. Promise."

"What, better plans?" She doesn't believe him.

Frost has stuck the door shut, so it takes a sharp pull to wrench it open. Eddie holds the door open for her, then circles the car and gets in to the driver's seat. He sticks the key in the ignition, then tugs off his gloves.

Patty's eyes watch him insistently.

"So?" she says.

"So," Eddie says, starting the engine. "I really *really* can't. Need to be somewhere by seven."

"Where?"

"Airport," Eddie says.

---

## JULY 1988

He wakes up in shivers, parched. Reaches up, shakily, to close the window. Cold night. The crickets are still loud.

Strange thoughts, dim and imprecise, cloud his head, igniting a strange fevered feeling in his body. Like a shiver through nerve endings. He lies unmoving, staring at the ceiling, afraid of the tight skein his own thoughts started unravelling from.

Edges fuzzy with sleep, a shattering sequence of images pushes its way to the front of the mind, before the eyes. A man and a woman, dancing in the night. Dancing together. *Cut*. Her pale arms raised over her head, him leaning down. *Cut*. His hands on her waist, holding up. *Cut*. Richie's hands, big and clumsy, colliding with his, skin brushing past skin, which burns a little, where it catches on the tail end of the cigarette. A spark of ash. *Cut*. Smile. Lips red from alcohol. Smoke. *If I leaned across. Cut. If I could speak. Cut. What the hell is this fucking feeling—*

Breathing shallow, exhausted with some absurd, overpowering futility, Eddie wants to bury his face in the pillow, and smother himself back into sleep. He draws himself up instead, swings his legs off the bed. The wood is cold under his feet as he walks to the kitchen in search of cold water.



Halfway there, he's distracted by a streak of light crawling from under the other door. He's turned off all the lights after making it inside, after throwing a blanket over the sleeping Richie and hovering only minute in silence.

*Richie*, Eddie thinks, tired eyes fixed on the threshold.

He abandons the trajectory, pushing at the door instead, and stops in the doorway.

Richie is sitting by the small table opposite to the bed. Warm lamplight pools around him, dispersed by a tall swaying wisp of smoke from the mosquito repellent. Hair a wild tangle of curls, like he's been running his hands through it. Face propped up on one hand, cheek reddened, elbow on the table.

"Why're you up? Thought you went to *sleep*," Eddie hears his own voice, bleary, words turning out stilted and funny. Too tired to force them into the proper cadence.

Richie looks up at him, startled, eyes bright and surprisingly guileless in the lowlight. Something shifts in his face, a smile caught midway through and stifled. Eddie blinks, rubbing at his eye. Maybe just the light playing tricks.

"Dunno," Richie says. Hoarse, pitch lower than usually, he sounds tired but sober, "Got myself in a mood, I guess. Couldn't sleep, started making notes."

Eddie nods, not really knowing what he's acquiescing in. He still feels weird. *Suspended*. He wants to take the step forward and go into the room, but he's too conflicted over the entailment of it.

Unsure if he's even welcome on the other side.

"Sometimes just being around people is enough to, you now. Push me into motion. I have to get it out of my head then quickly or it's gone forever" Richie adds at length, somewhat awkwardly, scratching his scruffy cheek.

Eddie has a sudden instinct to flinch.

*Then how do you get by here*, he wants to ask.

It takes him a while to comprehend the strange look on Richie's face—and realise he's spoken aloud. He flushes, hot and sudden, feeling finally awake.

"I've told you," Richie says at length, and there's a smile in his voice. "*You're* good writing material."

"Right, yeah," Eddie says stiffly. "You have."

He's unsettled, caught out—though not quite sure caught out doing *what*. Maybe still half-dreaming, tethered in a strange half-reality. Or maybe the still so foreign wish of *getting closer* to Richie, has made the mocking more difficult to rationalise. Maybe he's being irrational.

Throwing a glance towards the kitchen, he considers making coffee and getting to work early. The car is there, waiting for him. He's got the parts. This is what he's been waiting for, isn't it? And he knows the prickly feeling in his skin well enough: no more sleep, now.

"I'll just—" Eddie mutters in resignation, taking a step away, at the same time as Richie blurts, "You're going back to bed?"

Such a strange way to say it, surprising enough for Eddie to blink up at him. Disappointed? Childish, almost, kind of wistful.

Richie looks like he regrets saying it.

“Coffee,” Eddie says at length, feeling, suddenly, like he is navigating a minefield blind. “Want some?”

Richie seems relieved. “Uh, yeah. Yeah, sure, yeah.”

Eddie’s legs carry him back into to the dim of the kitchen, thoughts circling around the question, fixated. *Why?* The coffee trickles down the percolator, a steady rhythm. Eddie brings down two mugs from the cupboard.

*I’m not laughing at you. I like you. You’re good writing material. You’re going back to bed?*

*Oh*, Eddie thinks, understanding flaring like a diode in a circuit. *He is reaching out to me.*

Clumsily. Almost missing the aim. Derisively enough to pass as a joke.

Eddie frowns. The coffee is done. He unclenches the fingers of his hands he’s bunched into fists on the counter. Carefully taking the mugs, he steps past the threshold again, and into the veranda.

“Thanks, man,” Richie says, clearly grateful, reaching for his mug with both hands. Eddie hands it to him cautiously, painfully aware now of the brief brush of skin. For a moment, he hovers close, torn.

Then he sits down in the chair on the other side. Richie looks up at him in surprise.

Eddie is surprised, if he lets honesty slip past the husk of anxiety. But the prickly feeling from earlier grows warm, spatial. *Curious*. He meets Richie’s eyes for a split-second, then nods down at the pages.

“So what are you writing?” he hears his own voice.

There’s a pause. Richie winces lightly and rubs at his eye again under the glasses. A nervous gesture. *He’s stalling*, Eddie thinks, mystified. *And why*.

“Would you believe me,” Richie says at length, “if I said I have no idea?”

“You must have *some* idea,” Eddie counters. “It’s been, what, weeks now. What’s ... what’s, like, your basic plot? I remember from your rehearsal, something about—spying. Spying Germans?”

Richie looks up again, eyes lighting up in delight. “Oh, you were *listening*.”

Eddie is not deterred. He stares on, blunt, “You’re avoiding the answer.”

Richie smiles, but it’s shifty. “No, Eds, I just don’t have one. I don’t start with the plot, I start with the character,” he adds, evasively.

“Well, *who’s* the character.”

Richie sighs. “You ask a lot of fucking questions, Eddie.”

Eddie smacks his lips, looking at Richie searchingly. It’s cold in the veranda, a draft through the window and half-open front door picking at his skin.

“I mean, you can tell me to fuck off,” he says.

Richie throws him a wary look, as if thrown off balance by Eddie taking the bait. Then he leans over the table, almost brushing past Eddie's shoulder, and reaches for the nearest book. He plucks it out of the stack piled up on the table and something in Eddie's brain clicks in recognition.

"This is—my book," he tries to sound neither accusing nor defensive, and fails. The thought from earlier, of being watched and *seen*, returns, bitingly. "You're *not* writing."

"I'm getting there," Richie tells him. "Workshopping. Looking for, uh, inspiration."

"In my childhood books."

"Mm," Richie says noncommittally. He's thumbing through the yellowed pages till he finds a dog-eared page. He folds the book in half and passes it to Eddie. "Little you seemed to have a whole lot of opinions. What's this say, eh?"

"It's written in English, surely you can read it," Eddie says, but looks down at the page. Two words underlined: *run away*. A note scribbled across one of the margins, in a slanted, forceful handwriting.

A shiver creeps up his spine, chilling. Under the table, he tightens his fingers around the ankle he keeps hooked on his knee. It almost hurts. What a grotesque thing to be confronted with, your younger self's desperate invocation: *get out of here. Please*.

*See, I fucked it anyway*, Eddie thinks, unsure of who he is addressing. Himself, maybe. Someone who doesn't exist anymore. Cold to the bone now, he reaches for the shirt thrown carelessly over the back of his chair and pulls it around himself, folding his arms across his chest.

"S'just a translation," he says, stiffly. "I told you I was learning the language."

A tentative streak of light falls in through the window, and spills, scattering, over Richie's papers. Eddie can see a page of the typewritten manuscript under the ashtray next to Richie's elbow, words indistinct from this angle.

Something repeated, and then repeatedly *crossed out*.

Eddie realises suddenly that Richie is silent, a fact both rare and jarring. He looks up at him, but Richie's eyes are fixed somewhere on Eddie's chest, an odd, vague expression on his face.

"And anyway," Eddie adds, somewhat defensively. "I don't think psychoanalysing my thirteen-year-old self's reading habits will get you far with your script, Billy Wilder."

"Edward, you wound me," Richie says at length, as if breaking out of a trance. He is suddenly determinedly looking *away* from Eddie, scrawling something illegible on his notes instead. *Messy writing*, Eddie thinks, trying not to look, but *looking*. *Suits him*.

Richie goes on, "My ego is too fragile for that cutting tongue of yours in the small hours."

"No, I'd say your ego could do with a little fragility," Eddie tells him drily. "What'd you call Bill's writing—garbage?"

Richie mimes making a toast. "Aye, I'll drink to that. Even *he* knows it."

"Well, you," Eddie says, with pressure, "don't *have* a script."

“*Ouch*,” Richie says, hissing. But he does smile, even if still looking down. “Critical hit, dude.”

Eddie bites down at the inside of his mouth, and puts his coffee mug on the table. His knee bounces up and down, agitated.

“That’s *too* easy,” he huffs.

When Richie *finally* looks up, the shadowy expression from earlier is gone. His eyes are smiling: somewhat asymmetrical, crinkling in the corners.

“No, no. The artist *shall* suffer for his art,” he says, affecting a haughty odd cadence again that Eddie reckons is supposed to mimic something. “Every night I cry myself to sleep, and yet I wake and—”

“Oh, am I supposed to feel bad?”

“I don’t know, Edward, *do* you? Is it why you brought me here?” Richie says. “To have someone to boss around? Were you this mean to your wife? Cause man, I *gotta* say—”

“You shut the fuck up about my wife, okay,” Eddie cuts in, heatedly. But strangely enough, the tight knot of nerves inside relents at last, giving way to something less tenuous. Richie is grinning. *If he’s reaching out—*

Eddie narrows his eyes, levelling the man in front of him with an assessing glare. In the gauzy sunlight now pooling through the window, Richie’s head is haloed with tangled curls. Shadows under his eyes. In *bad* need of a shave. *Maybe don’t push him away.*

“What about you, huh?” he asks on impulse, without thinking it through. “Have someone waiting for you home? Girlfriend?”

Richie goes rigid.

“Ha—no,” he says. It feels strangely wrong to look, suddenly, in his direction. Like he is trying to fade back, fold in on himself. Take up less space.

“No, no,” he repeats, reaching up to scratch the back of his head. “I don’t really—I don’t really do that.”

Eddie blinks. “Like, relationships?”

“I guess,” Richie says, voice suddenly clipped. He picks at one of the pages and writes down something on the margin. “Confirmed bachelor.”

Only, just as he says it, he throws Eddie a look of eyes that’s nearly paralysing. Blue. Intent. Asking him some terrifying question.

Eddie thinks, *is this a warning? An invitation? Do you want me to take it? Or is it nothing, is there nothing here to read into? Do you want me to— What do you want? From me?*

And truth is, Eddie barely knows what he is doing. He’s not quite *thinking clear*, he’s only now realising the subconscious intention in his own question. Even receiving his answer, now, feels closer to just opening himself up to the implication and taking it straight into the bloodstream.

*Is this how you win, Eddie thinks, or is this how you lose.*

At length, Richie looks down at his notes again, picking up the pencil.

“You hungry?” Eddie hears his own voice, impulsive. “I’ll make you breakfast.”

Richie blinks owlshly, looking up. He seems disoriented. “Huh?”

“I’ll make breakfast,” Eddie repeats, “I’m starving. Do you want eggs? I can get you eggs. Bet you’ve never had ones this good in your life.”

Richie opens his mouth, then closes it. His eyes dawdle a moment longer in the vicinity of Eddie’s shoulder again.

And in a sudden flash of daunting clarity, Eddie becomes aware that the shirt he’s put on himself is in fact *Richie’s*. Knowing it’s too late to offer any sort of dignified explanation by now, he doesn’t as much as twitch to acknowledge it.

Richie says, “Bring in the eggs, man.”

---

Inhaling slowly, he gets up from the table and goes into the kitchen to fetch his basket and carton.

Eddie’s only close neighbour is a very old woman living up the hill, keeping Eddie’s chickens for him when he’s away. *Her chickens*, he thinks privately, but never says aloud. They’re friends, more or less.

Sometimes he thinks about how pathetic it is, that his friends include the eccentric bookkeeper at work and an old farmer’s widow in a flowery headcloth, trudging through her overgrown tomato patch. But in the end it doesn’t matter much. She calls him sweetheart, *kochaneczku*, say he’s a good boy.

She’s taught him to keep the chickens and pick out only the good mushrooms. *This is where you spot the bad part, the poison of them. Careful, sweetheart, you’re too impatient.* He carries milk for her up the hill in clinking bottles.

He’s startled fully awake by a sudden clatter of sound in the otherwise dim stillness of the room.

A single pair of small, vicious eyes stares at him in the lowlight. Eddie’s blood boils.

“Fuck you,” Eddie hisses. “Fuck you, fuck you—”

He lunges, but the marten evades him on a hasty beeline across the kitchen and veranda.

“*Wh—*” comes from Richie but Eddie doesn’t stop to listen.

He throws himself across the dewy grass barefoot, in nothing but his T-shirt, boxers and Richie’s hideous mustard yellow shirt, billowing behind him like the wings of a grotesque butterfly.

“No, *no*, you little bastard,” Eddie shouts, chasing the spooked animal behind the garage, “Not my fucking pantry!”

But the marten is gone, complete with the tip of its fuzzy tail. Eddie stands vengeful, breathing heavily. At length, he swivels around to face the house.

Richie is standing on top of the stairs. Staring at him. Wide-eyed. With that strange fucking expression again. *What's that expression, is he, what—*

*Flustered?* Eddie thinks, manic. *Are you?*

“Sorry I took your shirt, I didn’t realise,” he says, defiantly. It sounds almost rude.

*Not sorry.*

“No,” Richie says, after a moment. “Don’t worry about it.”

Then, “What, uh. Happened?”

“*Kuna*,” Eddie says curtly, stalking towards the gate. “I’ll go get the eggs.”

He stops abruptly, and turns back around. “I need pants.”

He thinks Richie wants to say something when he pushes past him and into the house, but mercifully doesn’t.

---

July grows late and ripens. Nights are warmer now.

Eddie gets to work. He picks the car apart. Takes it out on the car. *All* of it, the jittery and consuming sudden want of *change*, and the debilitating uncertainty over what exactly he wants *changed*. He’s rough with it, impatient, making stupid mistakes. Getting livid over having to fix them.

Next to him, infuriatingly close, Richie writes his script and drinks his foul coffee and hums off-tune songs to himself.

---

Eddie can hear him at nights. *Tap tap tap*, the relentless sound of the typewriter drifting muffled from the veranda at three in the morning when he pretends to sleep but can’t. It drives him crazy.

And it’s getting *precarious*, the way his thoughts drift and coil around the sound, wrap themselves around the idea of Richie sitting propped against the wall between their rooms. Typewriter on his lap, one leg stretched out. The bed in the veranda is comfortable, Eddie knows, or at least much less unforgiving than the cot he sleeps on now. With half-opened eyes he pictures laying on the bed next to Richie, listening to him type. *Tap tap tap*. He’d fall asleep, and maybe he’d turn over, unconsciously, and nuzzle his face into the side of him. This is what he wants, wasn’t it? *Company*. Just company, *closeness*. To someone.

He lies unmoving on the brink of sleep, listening to his own heartbeat, somehow alien and arrhythmic in its ribcage. The arduous push-pull of muscle as he breathes in, out, in again. He shuts his eyes, feeling the coarse linen of the pillow drag against his sleep-flushed skin. *There's an itch in my skin. I can't get rid of it, I can't move on, I don't know what to do.*

In the shallow waters of dreaming, in the room across the wall, Richie reaches out (though not quite looking away from his script) and runs his fingers through Eddie's hair. He doesn't open his eyes again. *Closeness. Touch.*

---

In the afternoon, the heat relents enough for Eddie to finally give in and tosses his spanner away. Wiping his hands on the ratty cloth he keeps tucked into his pocket, he surfaces from the stale air of the garage and walks out into the garden.

Even the earth seems fired-up under his feet, radiating warmth through the wayward grass that nuzzles at his bare ankles, mildly cutting under the hem of his oil-stained trousers. The table is set out, half-shaded by the pine tree, with the water flagon and decanter left out since breakfast. Ice has melted by now.

Feeling the muscles in his neck and shoulders ache and unclench in sunlight, Eddie stretches, wincing as he raises his hands up towards the sky, and then falls heavily into one of the chairs. Richie's notes and papers lay strewn across it, some of the scraps picked away by the wind and carried off into the garden.

Richie himself is laid out in the hammock. One of his long legs is hanging from the side of it, one arm draped over his head. Eyes half-lidded behind the glasses, but fixed on the script in front of him. A chewed up pencil between his teeth like a cigarette. *What a godawful habit.*

Eddie shuts his eyes. *Yes, awful.* Doing nothing for days on end but this. Writing something, supposedly. Something he'll never show Eddie, for whatever goddamned reason. Something Eddie wants to see so badly and doesn't understand why.

He tilts his head back. The sunlight is thin and drowsy on his face. Kinder than at noon, softer. There are sounds in distance, a bird, faint engine far on the road. Specks of gossamer crowd the air, nuzzling at Eddie's face. He feels his ribcage, expand, contract.

*Breathe. You're alive that's a good thing.*

Somewhere on the periphery of closeness, Richie sighs, deep, like he was resigning himself to something. *To what?* There's a rustle of paper and his script falls to the grass.

Eddie's eyes open on their own accord, halfway, and search for him. Richie seems half-asleep now, one hand on his chest, head tilted back. His face seems smoother, slack. Eyes closed. His hair curls over the temples.

Eddie closes his eyes.

---

It's memory-not-dream, replayed like caught on camera, and it comes to him uninvited and involuntary. *Vivid.*

The car drives down the road.

"*Baby,*" Richie's voice unstitched with laughter. And Eddie's skin burning up, even then, in the palms and fingertips. Hands clasped on the steering wheel, he takes a sharp turn.

Richie's shoulder digs into his. *G-force. And little space.*

Loud wind streaking in through the half open window: Eddie breathes in. *I'm fine.* His chest hurts like the nonexistent airbag is already pushing into it.

Like he's already crashed.

---

Another sigh, and Eddie is startled awake. Richie is unfolding himself from the hammock, big, dishevelled. Shirt half-hanging from his shoulder. He stretches, and it rides up over his stomach—flash of dark hair, there, too. Happy trail.

Eddie forces his eyes onto the table. *For nothing,* as seconds later Richie is there, reclining lazily on the chair across from Eddie, smiling a smug lazy smile.

The itch grows uncomfortable.

"Well, *hello,*" Richie says, yawning widely. "Comrade Kaspbrak decided to grace us with his presence."

Eddie frowns at him. "I'm on a break," he mutters, too tired to snap back properly.

Richie nods sagely, "Could use a break too."

Eddie snorts, head falling back against the chair. "From *what.*"

Richie made a vague gesture in the air. "Creating."

Eddie shakes his head, but he's powerless to stop the smile that fights its way onto his face. "I saw you fall sleep."

"You look really fucking sleepy yourself," Richie counters nonsensically, and Eddie can't find it in himself to argue. Richie plucks at the abandoned decanter. A lone dead wasp is swimming on the surface of the water.



Then Richie startles him out of his haze by asking, “You got more of that cherry death of yours?”

Eddie blinks a little, “It’s *daylight*,” he says sullenly.

Richie kicks at his ankle lightly under the table. “*Live* a little.”

For a moment, Eddie just stares at him, wrapped in the cottony inertia of tiredness, knowing it’s the only thing keeping him from returning to the dangerous line of thought from earlier. He’s aware, dimly, that if he lets himself sober up even a little, he’ll spiral into something along the lines of panic.

He lets his thoughts slide over the notion instead. He thinks, *don’t think, then. For once.*

“If you bring it from the garage,” he says and Richie beams at him.

---

They get drunk too easy. Maybe it’s the sunlight.

Richie swallows the liqueur down hastily and and chokes. Eddie stares at him.

“Jesus, *stop*, this isn’t wine,” he says, reaching to take the glass out of Richie’s hand. “That’s *not* how you drink it.”

Richie blinks at him, eyes reddened. “How d’you do it?”

His lips are stained red again. Eddie’s words stumbled into each other and dissolve. Instead of answering, he reaches over to pour, carefully, then takes a shot.

“Cute,” Richie says, nonsensically, as Eddie winces and puts his glass down.

The alcohol is still burning his throat as he asks, “So how’s the script?”

“Decided what it’s about yet?”

Recurring question. Circular. Left so pointedly, poignantly unanswered.

“*You*,” Richie throws at him, slightly slurred, almost on autopilot. “Cowboys. No, like. Expat returns to homeland. Drama slash spy thriller.”

Eddie laughs. Maybe it’s just the alcohol, maybe also the sunlight, but he feels warm and scattered. Skin tingling. “You want to shoot the second *Godfather* here.”

Richie stuffs a cherry in his mouth and pushes it into the side of his jaw.

“*I’m gonna make him an offer he can’t refuse*,” he rasps out, in a pitch-perfect imitation of Brando that startles Eddie enough he bursts out with helpless laughter. Richie grins.

“That was you, by the way,” he says. “Inviting me here.”

“Oh, *shut up*,” Eddie says, but he can’t keep smiling. “You’re so fucking annoying.”

“You love it,” Richie mutters, dismissively.

*I do*, Eddie thinks fatuously, chest suddenly tight as he watches Richie reach behind the table and picks up the guitar Eddie recognises from his own garage. Richie pulls it in his lap, and strums, the sound rough and jarring.

“Can you even play?” Eddie asks, dazedly.

“Badly,” Richie tells him happily, tugging at the strings and drawing something like a distant echo of the *Godfather* waltz out of it. Eddie winces, or smiles. He doesn’t know himself.

And he thinks, *it’s happened. I’ve finally gone insane.*

It had to happen. He’s never thought it would happen like this, but there’s no telling, is there? He is warm all over now, heart too loud and restless for his ribcage, as if not wanting to be contained. Eddie thinks, *I’ve never fucking felt like this before.*

He swallows, exhaling through his nose, staring at Richie and not knowing how to disguise it anymore. *Do you know?*

“If you—were,” he says, throat dry. “To write a movie about me. What would I be like.”

Richie hits a bad note, and falters. He doesn’t look at Eddie for a while. Eddie bites down at his lip so hard he tastes blood. Valiantly, he picks up, “What sort of movie would that be?”

Richie picks at a string. He still won’t look at him.

Then he says, “Something ... I don’t know. *Rebel without a cause.*”

Eddie snorts, looking away. He’s—he doesn’t *know*. Flattered. Flustered? *Embarrassed*, mostly. *God he’s drunk too much.*

“Shut up,” he mutters again.

Richie puts down the guitar and frames a shot with his hands around Eddie’s face.

“Really,” he says. “A mystery—a mysterious past. You know? A dull life, then a breaking point. Something hanging in the air, inescapable, like fate. Finally, action sequence. Cathartic but tragic climax. Then at last wide shot at the fields, the protagonist walking away.”

Eddie realises suddenly he’s smiling the stupidest sort of smile. He pulls his face into a half-hearted frown.

He says, “No one would watch that. Did you just call my life dull?”

Richie sighs, disregarding him. “No one *will* watch what I currently have.”

Eddie tilts his head, trying to peer at some of the notes, but Richie puts his elbow on top of the pages, blocking the sight.

Eddie looks up at him. “It can’t be *that* bad.”

Richie doesn’t answer.

“Let me have a *look*,” Eddie says again. He leans heavily across the table, arms outstretched, looking up at Richie, trying to tell himself what he’s doing is neither pouting or making eyes at him, and trying not to think all that much at all.

But something goes wrong, as it always does. A strange expression flashes and shifts, harsh and fleeting, across Richie's face. Something tense, almost frightened. He seems to shut off.

“Can’t,” he says at last, quietly. “Consider it my little secret.”

Eddie swallows. His throat is dry, and his head begins to ache. His body is warm all over now, as if feverish. And the warmth tightens, changed into something terrifying. Heart beats too rapid all of the sudden, scattershot, like even this heavy sunlight can't put it to sleep.

What is this, this feeling? *Want*.

“Secrets get out,” he says at length, then gets up, somewhat wobbly, to go back to the garage.

---

It goes on, like this, intermittent. Silence, conversation, distraction, work, feeling. Cold at night, parching in sunlight. On and on and *on*.

*And where’s the breaking point?* Eddie thinks, changing the oil. *When if not now?*

---

It comes along with August, on a Saturday, stifling and mind-numbing. Sweltering *fucking* hot. He’s been out washing the car. It’s finished, more or less, meaning an end to this particular distraction, and the thought makes Eddie uneasy. The air is so thick and sweet and full of clover it’s almost unendurable. He almost likes it, only not really. He’d like it more if he knew the direction.

Richie is sitting by the table, in full sunlight, reading through his newest additions to the thick file of his script. Making notes on the margin with ink-stained hands, his shirt half-unbuttoned. Frowning.

Eddie’s hands are stained with motor oil that doesn’t wash off easily. He drops the sponge into the water, and wipes them on his work T-shirt. It hasn’t rained in weeks. The grass is burning up by now, yellowing. His thoughts are clearer now, searing like electricity.

Richie stretches, head tilting back. His eyes fall closed, slowly. And it comes, finally, full-formed. Crash.

*I have to touch you*, Eddie thinks, keen-eyed across the grass, standing in the shadow of the garage. *I have to touch you*.

*I have to touch you or I’ll fucking die*.

---

He speaks out, suddenly, voice drowsy. “Was your father, like, *political*?”

Eddie frowns, thrown off balance. He wipes his hands and walks out of the garage, propping his arm against the entrance instead. “What does that mean, political?”

“I mean, was he involved in like, the riots,” Richie muses from the hammock, nose still buried in his script. “Or whatever. You said something about a shipyard. Is that why he had to leave?”

“Or whatever,” Eddie mutters, echoing, too quiet for Richie to pick up from this distance. Richie’s collected all of his papers from the table, which seems strangely deserted now in the grass. Eddie looks down at his sun-bronzed, oil-stained hand, clenches the fingers into a fist.

“He didn’t *have* to leave,” he says, after a pause, drawing back into the shadow. “He just left. Long before the riots.”

“Were *you* part of the riots?”

“Where’s this coming from, all of a sudden?” Eddie asks, nettled. He throws an assessing glance at Richie searchingly, but he keeps reading his script, oblivious.

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Why not?” And Richie looks up at him at last, with a strange boring look in his eyes. “If you hate it here so much, why not—”

“Because it’s reckless,” Eddie interjects, curtly. Then he winces.

He’s grasped, suddenly with a familiar cold, sick feeling. Mindlessly, he picks up one of his tools from the workstation, then lets it fall back onto the wood with a clatter.

The words taste quite bitter when he adds, quietly, “Because I’m a coward.”

There’s a moment of silence, and Eddie thinks Richie hasn’t heard.

And then, in a stymied voice that seems almost void of any intonation. “No, I don’t think you are.”

Eddie doesn’t know what to say to that. At length, he says, “Unreliable narrator.”

“Mm. Maybe,” Richie muses, inconsequentially. He’s looking at his script again, like he’s distracted or absent-minded, and Eddie finds that it grates on his nerves. “So what would you do, eh?”

Eddie frowns at him. “What would *I* do?”

“If you followed your father’s footsteps,” Richie says, still so painfully neutral it’s anything but. “And left.”

*Something is being said here*, Eddie thinks, swallowing. He’s entirely tense now, every nerve and muscle like a taut wire, *but I can’t tell what*.

He looks down at his hands, then snorts.

The feeling that wells up inside him is tenuous, pulling at the weak muscle in his chest as if to remind it it's constrained. Remind him the shape of its constraints: his own uncertain body and weak mind. It's not a new feeling, not even close, but Eddie associates it most strongly with the past, the time he's still had faith in something.

Hoped to change.

Gripping at one of his wrists with the other hand, he breathes through his nose, feeling suddenly reduced to desperation.

"I don't know," he says, looking at the ground, and his voice is scared and hollow now. "Live, I guess. Start over."

"Start over what?" Richie's voice is stymied, softened from the casual negligence from earlier, but the notion escapes Eddie's grasp. He feels himself pull back inwards, grow distant and disconnected from the immediacy of reality around him. He can't feel the sunlight anymore, cold in a strange, internalised way. Cold to the *bone*.

The sharply delineated edges of his hands become blurred.

"Life," he says, barely audible now. "This one didn't really work out."

There's an ache in his throat, a pressure on the vocal cords. He swallows.

"Hey, look at me," Richies voice comes, strangely close. When Eddie looks up, he's startled to find him very close, having gotten up from the hammock at some point and crossed the garden—only to stop in arm's reach from Eddie.

Feeling suddenly hunted, Eddie schools his features sharply into a frown, challenging, as if to defy the humiliating blur of his eyes.

The worst part, the *worst* part, is that Richie doesn't seem to be taking it as a joke either. He's not even smiling, a look of rapt concern on his face that's almost like something else, something *worse*, something—

"It's nothing," Eddie says sharply, clenching his jaw.

For a moment, Richie hesitates. And then he speaks anyway, voice low and taut, a bad joke that's not a joke at all.

"We could, like, smuggle you out," he says meekly, and Eddie wishes, *wishes* he hadn't. "You're so compact sized. We'll stuff you in a suitcase."

Despite himself, a corner of Eddies mouth twitches. He presses his eyes closed, shaking his head.

"Asshole," he says.

Richie's quiet for a moment. "I want to leave sometimes, too. I mean, fuck the American dream, everything sucks anyway. Half the time I want to fuck off somewhere far and nowhere, so no one can ever find me again."

Eddie opens his eyes. Richie is standing in front of him, tall and awkward, a small smile on his face and in his eyes. He's wearing the yellow shirt, and it's badly buttoned. Asymmetrical.

"You mean like *here*," Eddie says at last. "Well, sorry to disappoint."

Richie laughs, a strange, stifled sound that's quite unlike him.

"No," he says, voice soft. "No, Eds, this is as far from disappointing as it gets."

He turns his head and looks off somewhere over the field beyond the gate.

And says, "I'm beginning to think I won't know how to come back."

*This*, Eddie thinks in sudden and terrible clarity, *is something that will hurt if you keep pushing at it. Like a bruise. There's no way out of it whole thing that wouldn't fucking hurt.* And at the same time, he thinks, *Keep pushing. It already hurts anyway.*

And Richie does, of course, because Eddie's not the only one with a death wish.

"Maybe there's a way," he says, not looking at Eddie at all, "Maybe you can still—get out."

But to have it said aloud is suddenly too much.

"And do *what*?" Eddie bites out.

It comes out so bitter and cynical, so ungrateful, that it takes even him by surprise. But that's what Eddie is, at his core, for most of the dreary months in the year, well out of sunlight and the strange movielike illusions, well into the paralysing cold of every dragging hour. Small and hard and twisted, there it is. The truth.

"Do what?" he repeats, voice low and cutting. "Start over *how*? For—for *what*. All it would do is—hurt people, break things. And I'd let it go to waste anyway. I'd let it go to waste anyway, because I wouldn't know what to do with—"

"I'm not talking about other people, Eddie," Richie interjects, quietly. "I'm talking about *you*."

"Me?" Eddie echoes. There's a wind, picking at his shirt and hair, suddenly almost cold. "I'm not—"

Richie's eyes are somehow unendurable. "Not what?"

But he feels so *tired*. Exhausted. Hating to feel so exposed, he turns his face—contorted with some awful emotion—away from Richie and shuts his eyes.

"What do you *want* from me," he asks, harshly. "What do you want me to say."

There's a pause.

"What *you* want, for a start—" Richie says.

"I don't know."

"You don't *know*," Richie presses, "or you think you can't?"

Eddie inhales sharply, "I can't—"

“But you *can*,” Richie says, pushing too far. “It’s *your life*, dude. It’s yours to do what you want with it. Even to fuck it up, maybe it’s—”

“It’s not that easy.”

“It can—”

“*Nie*,” Eddie says, angry, loud. His eyes snap open, meeting Richie’s head on.

There’s a ringing silence.

“*Nie*,” Richie echoes, faintly. But it’s not mocking, it’s worse. Soft. sad. Eddie can’t endure looking at him.

“No,” Eddie says, correcting himself. “Sometimes it’s not. *Easy*. And can’t be.”

His eyes are red, now, and wet, and there are tear tracks down his face, burning hot. And there’s something pathetic in it all, so deeply humiliating, but Eddie doesn’t care. He stares at Richie, *daring* him to say it and thinking, fervently, *I don’t care. I don’t fucking care.*

Richie doesn’t say anything, he just looks at him.

*Don’t look at me.*

But he doesn’t look away, not until Eddie does. He tears himself from the door and walks away, only half-aware of his own body, through the tall grass and up to the house. The birds keep crying, loud, overlapping.

---

Richie withdraws, afterwards.

When Eddie gets up, Richie is already up as well, and they rarely intercept, rarely share spaces. If they talk, it’s about nothing at all.

He wants to shout at him. Wants to ask about the script. Is it finished? Is this all finished now, are you waiting to be left out?

*Then why don’t you fucking leave?*

He feels feverish every day now, and lies awake at night, thinking himself into the other room, somehow. Constructing new, feverish, illogical tangents of continuous collisions. He thinks about the things he wants: he wants to press his face to Richie’s neck. *An itch*. Sneak his hands under his shirt, the one that’s rumpled, that he’s worn the day before. *Under my skin*. Run them up through his hair, then down, lower, down. *Which burns*.

*Touch me*, Eddie thinks. *I’m so fucking sorry I ruined it.*

But Richie seems to sleep better at nights, now. Either that, or he’s simply run out of words. There is no typewriter, just silence, maddening. Inviting too much thinking.

He finds one crumpled page of the abandoned script in the corner of the kitchen. He picks it up, and straightens.

There's only one word: *Eddie*.

Crossed out.

Eddie traces the paper with his fingers, then withdraws them, as though burnt.

---

The afternoon is sticky, still warm, *too* warm—but quieter now.

The car is finished, nothing left to do, and Eddie's hands feel empty. He goes around the garage picking up things and stuffing them in order. He's cleaned the oil off his hands. There's something new in the air now, a latent melancholy. *There's gonna be a thunderstorm soon*, Eddie thinks, stymied. *Violent, like they tend to be here round this time of year*.

A lightning conductor is threaded along the roof of the house like a stitch, since the beginning, the little wooden house's prayer against fire. Eddie wipes his neck with the new clean cloth he's brought to the garage, sighing. Eddie feels different now. Tired, *exhausted*, body and head. He wants the thunderstorm to come now. He's sick of the feeling of waiting.

"Hey," comes a sudden voice. Eddie's heart stutters in his chest. He looks up.

He hasn't seen much of Richie in the past few days. He's *resigned* himself to it, more or less, reverting back to his old system of distraction chasing distraction.

And yet there he is now at the garage door, outlined with the afternoon light. Even now he looks a little apprehensive, sheepish, as if assessing his surroundings. It's first time he's come up to Eddie voluntarily since the conversation.

Eddie wants to *reach* for him, but doesn't.

It's almost laughable, how his whole body seems to aim towards him, despite any logic, despite the fact that for all he knows Richie might be here to finally say goodbye. It's with tremendous effort, and mostly out of fear, that he holds himself still.

"Hey," Eddie echoes, quietly, arranging the tools on the counter into a row, pushing the edges together to form a shape. "Everything okay?"

He keeps his eyes low to spare Richie the want in them.

There's a shuffling noise. Eddie still doesn't look up but he imagines Richie walking further into the garage, hands in pockets, lightly hunched.

"Yeah. I, uh, fell asleep," Richie begins, hoarsely, scratching his jaw. "I was trying to write but I can't anymore, I think I've burned out or—I don't know. The first draft's ready, so I guess it's fine, but I'm, uh, I'm practically useless. So I fell asleep. For like, *hours*."



Eddie's hands still their movement on the table. Breathing through his nose, completely still, he waits for something in what Richie's saying to start making sense. Become definitive. *Yes or no. I'm going, I'm not going to go.*

Richie goes on, rambling, almost distracted, "And then I woke up and it was late afternoon again and thought, Jesus fuck, I'll *do* something, I'll make myself useful. Wanted to do something for you, cause, all I do is get on your nerves, so I tried to make you coffee your way—I mean because you're always drinking it and complaining—I think, fuck, I broke your percolator? And then I thought I'd get the kitchen radio to pick up one of the stations you were asking about but I got stuck on something Russian, I don't know, it sounds like news? There's some singing, but it's like—choral, I don't know. My point is, in the end I just came here. I guess what I'm saying is, do with me what you will, Eds. If you want me gone now, just tell me, I'll pay up. I mean, the script's practically finished anyway."

Towards the end of Richie's speech, Eddie has put down the last of his tools and chanced, warily, to look up. Richie looks miserable, taut with tension on the other side of the car with his hands in his pockets. Like he's waiting for a sentence. Like he's scared.

*Don't be scared*, Eddie thinks, desperately. *Come on, smile. How the fuck have I made you so miserable.*

"Richie," he says, "what the *fuck* are you talking about."

Wiping his hands clean again, he makes his way around the car, pausing closer to Richie than he's allowed himself to get in days.

Richie sighs, looking out into the garden. "Just put me out of my misery, man."

"Misery?" Eddie asks. He bites at the inside of his cheek, weighing his chances. He might be wrong, but he thinks—he thinks something is unfolding here differently that he's feared it would. He thinks of risking something.

He says, "I thought you said being here wasn't disappointing?"

Richie looks up at him, as if unsure if he's serious or not.

"That's not what I—" he begins, then trails off. "Look, man, I'm sorry about that thing the other day, I crossed a fucking line, I shouldn't have—"

"Richie," Eddie says again. His voice has always been fast and rough round the edges. It's not a sweet voice. Not good with sweet things. But he goes on anyway, "You have nothing to be fucking sorry for. I mean—obviously I won't stop you if you want to leave, but—"

"I don't *want* to leave," Richie says, too fast.

Eddie blinks.

It's like something in him is coming undone. Richie is still looking down at him. Sad, sweaty and tousled like he's just woken up, *and he has*, shirt dishevelled and badly buttoned.

"Then don't," Eddie says curtly, looking Richie in the eyes.

There's a new tension in the air, quieter and more elusive than the earlier desperation. More a *pull* than a burning. Eddie feels a little like he's drunk again, hazy, with the same feeling of warmth expanding spatially through the bloodstream, the same seamlessly located aim. Forward, *to—*

"Wanna come sit outside?" Richie says hoarsely, blinking. "We can, like, have a drink. Or just sit there, if you're tired, I don't mind. I mean, you don't have to, I know you have work. I just, can't really stand my own head right now. And I kind of missed you. I mean, that's fucking stupid, you're right here, I just—*h—*"

Eddie reaches for his face with both hands and kisses him.

He's intent, *deliberate*, and so much softer than he thought he *could* be after so long wanting. He thinks, barely thinking, *There it is. There you are. It was always going to end here. What did you call it? Breaking point.*

*Car crash. Fire. Everything.*

He breaks off and leans away, Richie following him as if on instinct with a small wounded sound, his eyes closed, lips parted. When he opens them, he looks stunned.

"Do you—do you want—" Eddie manages to say before Richie is moving forward and kissing him again. It's somehow even *more* this time, Richie's hands moving blindly to settle at his waist, and push him up against the car, tongue sliding into his mouth as Eddie tilts head sideways for a better angle. Everything realigns, accordingly, centres and focuses: *Richie*. So close at last.

Eddie's whole body is on fire, nerves and synapses and rushing blood, and yes, *now*, now he feels alive. He breaks off the kiss to draw his lips down the side of Richie's jaw and throat, drawing another half-stifled sound out of him.

"Oh fuck," Richie breathes out. "*Fuck*, Eddie—"

"Take me home," Eddie says.

Outside, it starts to rain.

---

At night, the rain turns into a downpour.

Lying in bed, only half-awake, Eddie watches through bleary eyes the rain fall and shatter against the wide windows in the veranda, loud and rhythmical and long-awaited.

Next to him, Richie sleeps.

---

Richie's voice is sleepy. Indistinct. Soft.

"You wanted to be an *astronaut*?"

"No, a pilot," Eddie corrects him, then falls quiet.

It feels strange to speak about it. Hushed thing, buried deep. But he *has* wanted that, early on, as a boy. Made plans, long and intricate. Intricate dreams of constructing an airplane, of pushing into motion, then—*away*. "Yeah. There's a school, an hour's drive from Warsaw. Thought I could go."

"Why didn't you?"

Eddie opens his eyes, blinked at the ceiling, breathing quietly.

"I was sick," he says at last. "I couldn't breathe properly."

"You breathe alright now."

*Because it wasn't real*, Eddie almost says. *She made me think I was sick for years to keep me from turning into my father. It ruined my life. I think I'm still sick, now, because of her. Maybe I'll always be.*

But it can't get through his throat.

"Yeah, I guess," he says instead. Swallows.

Richie presses a kiss to the side of his neck. Eddie closes his eyes again, breath hitching.

Another kiss. Higher, closer to the pulse point.

"You'd make a good pilot," Richie muttered. "I'd fly with you."

Eddie laughs. "You're scared when I *drive*."

"Yeah," Richie says. "And I still want you to drive me."

---

"They all came to like—evaluate."

"Me?" Eddie says, incredulously. "*Jesus*."

Richie laughs, but it's quiet, embarrassed. He pushes the heel of his hand into his eyes to hide them.

"No, like, asses if—if I was going crazy. Making shit up because I was so desperate," he says with another small laugh. "Or if you really were. Potentially. You know. Verdict would be either yes, or that I'll spend the rest of this summer in self-imposed agony."

"You didn't do anything after that," Eddie points out, amused. "For *weeks*. Did they think I wasn't, or —"

"No, they thought you were. Or, well, Bev did."

Eddie thinks back to Beverly's eyes on him and licks his lips.

“Okay, then,” he mutters. “So?”

“So I was scared, I guess,” Richie tells him, inhaling sharply and swallowing. “Scared shitless. Since you drove me there. Since you asked me to come, since I said I would. Since I saw you looking at me in the rehearsal room, I was fucking frightened.”

“Yeah,” Eddie says. “Me too.”

---

Days continue to pass, and August hunches slowly, shadows lying longer and the light in the evenings growing wistful.

*Summer is ending*, Eddie thinks, but stifles the thought. *No. Not yet.*

He turns his head to the side. They’re lying stretched in the soft wild grass right outside of the gate, Eddie’s ankle hooked lazily over Richie’s calf, in plain sight. But there’s nobody else there.

The gate is open wide. Along the left side, cowered under the hazelnut, there grow wild raspberries. Seeded out years ago by some long-gone neighbours, never quite died out. Eddie stretches out his hand and plucks one. Crushes it between his fingers, red juice smudging the skin. He picks another one. Two. He puts them in his mouth.

Licks his fingers.

“How the *fuck* can you expect me,” comes Richie’s drowsy, slow voice. He lies with his eyes closed, glasses folded on his chest and hooked in the collar of his shirt. “To *ever* fucking want to get up. I’m *never* getting up.”

“Sure,” Eddie agrees, drowsily. He kind of wants to close his eyes and drift off, too, giving in to the moment.

But he draws himself up instead, crawling across the grass. He kneels over Richie, legs on both sides of his hips, hands flat on his chest. Richie’s eyes flutter open, unfocused without the glasses. He smiles.

“What’s up?” he mutters.

He’s tucked a white clover flower behind his ear.

“Something sweet,” Eddie tells him, cryptic.

He leans down to kiss him.

---

The air is crisp and treacherous, the first cold evening of decaying summer. Richie keeps his hands in the pockets of his jacket as he follows Eddie along the orchard lane. *First apples*, Eddie thinks, looking at the trees. He swallows, taken with a sudden feeling so poignant and overwhelming it catches in his throat.

“Why don’t you do this for a living?” Richie asks, oblivious, “Just move out here instead of being in the city. Start a garage, or get into farming, I don’t know.”

Eddie laughs, the sound harsher than he’s meant it to be. The pressure in his throat relents somewhat, letting him speak.

“What world do you live in,” Eddie says, quietly. “Where you just get to do what you *want* to?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Richie mutters. Eddie unlatches the fence and lets him out onto the path to the forest. The sun is tilting downwards on the sky, and Eddie wants them to get home before dark. Drinks something warm and goes to bed.

Richie picks up, “I could come visit you. Or, I don’t know. You could *move*. We have farms in America. You could be a cowboy.”

For a moment, Eddie doesn’t know how what to say. How to say it. How to clothe it in words, this tenuous ragged feeling in his chest.

*It scares me how much I want to. How hideously unreachable it is.*

“I’m sorry,” Richie says abruptly, startling him, “Forget it, it’s stupid.”

Brows knitting together, Eddie looks up at him. And there it is again, that look. Shifty, vague.

He’s used to think it meant something else, but Eddie learns to see the pattern now, the wide shot: all of his derision, and clumsy ventures, all of the the hesitation in Richie’s hands. He’s not scared of *Eddie*. *He’s scared of himself*.

The feeling grows, raw and pulling. Terrible, almost. But not quite.

“I’d like to,” Eddie says, quiet and deliberate. He draws to a halt so Richie has to stop, too, and look him in the eyes. “I want to. Go with you. I just don’t know *how*.”

Richie swallows, then looks down. Nods.

---

It gets cold in the end, first morning rime crawling up the glass window in the early morning, the cold insinuating itself inside, biting at the skin. Richie clings to Eddie where they lie on the bed under the drafty window, fully clothed. His sports bag lies packed next to the front door.

“Is the movie going on?” Eddie asks, quietly.

“If they approve the script—most likely,” Richie says. “But Stan says we’ll shoot most of it in Romania.”

Eddie stares at the ceiling. “Never been to Romania,” he says, inanely.

“They have vampires,” Richie tells him, nosing at the side of his jaw. “And you? You’ll have work now?”

Eddie blinks, “Yes, I suppose. My *summer contract* is over, I have to go back.”

“Say hello to your wife from me,” Richie mutters. He kisses the side of Eddie’s jaw.

Eddie wants to laugh but it dies in his throat, the sound turning into something strangled. Aching.

“Hey, now,” Richie says instantly, reaching for both his hands. Threading their fingers together. “Hey, look at me.”

Eyes wet, Eddie does.

---

On the first of September, they drive back to Warsaw.

---

He has a dream, recurring, throughout the first months after Richie leaves, about trying to fly. He’s running down a hill towards the precipice, desperate to take off into flight as soon as he jumps off. He realises, towards the end, when it’s too late to stop, that he *won’t*.

Then someone catches him from behind, arms wrapping around him, pulling him back from the edge last minute. He presses his face into Eddie’s ear, and mutters, “You forgot the airplane.”

Eddie turns, then, to touch or kiss him, but by the time he does, Richie is gone.

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## **JANUARY 1991**

“No, no you don’t, *I can literally take a cab.*”

“Jesus, shut the fuck up,” Eddie says, pressing his forehead against the dirty glass. “You’re not taking a cab, I have a car that works no matter what you think of it, I’ll drive to the airport.”

He looks out of the booth. It's snowing: ubiquitous flecks of white crowding the blindingly bright air. The glass pane mutes all sound from outside, making the whole thing look falsely gentle. Enticing.

Softly, Eddie says, "There's not even that much snow."

*"I fucking know you're lying,"* Richie says. *"You're so fucking bad at lying. There's probably people digging tunnels in it all around you."*

"Bite me," Eddie tells him. Then, "I missed you, asshole. I'm not gonna waste time."

There's a pause.

*"Fuck, you're right,"* Richie says, and he sounds slightly different. He's probably close to tears, and pretending *not* to be for the sake of Eddie's ... something. Sanity, maybe. He'd roll his eyes, if he weren't so focused on the arduous progression of the time on his wristwatch now. *"I rest my case, come pick me up in your chariot."*

"Get here first," Eddie says.

Richie laughs, the sound tinny and distorted through the connection, and tugging at Eddie's heart even so. *"Yeah, I'm trying. I actually need to go now, I'll be boarding in—I don't know. Two hours?"*

Eddie clenches his fist and braces his forearm on the glass. He says, "Don't you fucking dare miss your flight."

*"Yeah, love you too. See you, Spaghetti."*

"Yeah, see you, Rich," Eddie says, and hears the connection click off.

Slowly, he puts the receiver back on the base unit. He looks at it for a moment, unseeingly, face drawn into an automatic frown. Almost on instinct, his hand slides under the layers of his sheepskin coat and jacket, tightening around the thin rectangular shape in the inner pocket on his breast.

Inhaling sharply, Eddie pushes at the door and steps out into the snow.

---

First time Richie has come back it has been snowing, too. Fall has come upon Eddie like whiplash, rupturing any and all stability. Winter has let him settle into something different, newer. In his deconstructed life, a vague and strenuous hope.

January, and he was back.

Everything between them tenuous at first, fragile. A cautious hug at the airport, both desperate and necessary for Eddie to determine that Richie's shape and smell haven't changed from what he remembers, that it still feels just as grounding to have him wrap his arms around him and hold on.

"Hey, sunshine," Richie has said, muffled, into the crook Eddie's neck. Like first words spoken in a lifetime.

They weren't. They've *talked*, Eddie waiting for the connection with his heart in his throat. Then a sharp click, a hum of static. A breath, close and far away.

"Hello?" Eddie saying, into ether. "Richie?"

"Hey," Richie's voice, fuzzy with distance, warm. "*Good to hear you.*"

Eddie has smiled through the burning in his eyes, the sudden ache in his chest so constricting he almost can't breathe. Smiles wider.

"You too," he's said, voice hoarse.

They've *written*, beginning with Richie sending Eddie a bundle of discarded *script notes* tied together by a thread, comprised of a string of unfinished, increasingly incoherent letters to him and about him, that Eddie rereads deliriously when he can't sleep.

Have even, briefly, touched.

East Berlin, a quick embrace backstage, some festival. A hotel room. Pouring rain outside.

---

There he *is*, now, at the arrivals. He gives Eddie a little awkward wave from a distance, and it's like Eddie is a mechanism put into motion. He lets himself go, pulling out from the group of nameless people huddled under the stairs and comes running towards him.

He collides with Richie's chest somewhere midway, arms tightening around his neck as Richie pulls him in, *close*, so tight it almost hurts.

*Richie*. He's wearing a big puffy jacket, he smells like a plane, and sweat, and the same cologne he's used three years ago. *Richie*. As they stand, rocking slightly from side to side, Eddie thinks only his name.

---

He ushers Richie into the car and hands him the thermos while he stretches over the front front window to scrape off the new layer of persistent frost.

"Who'd you kill this time, Doctor K?" Richie calls out from inside, sniffing the steaming liquid inside as he takes a tentative sip. He keeps the door open.

"That's *barszcz*," Eddie tells him sternly. "It's good and you're *going* to eat it because I made it for you."

He did. He meticulously peeled the beetroot and formed the tiny *uszka* dumplings himself one by one, with terrifying precision, sitting in his kitchen at night, because he couldn't sleep.



---

He turns the key in the lock and Richie steps inside.

The tiny box of a flat is cold and stark, bland white-painted walls and a dreary collection of austere, eclectic furniture. And Eddie can *feel* Richie's wary eyes taking note of his surroundings, cataloguing it for the oncoming string of ostensibly innocuous questions that will probe for details of Eddie's mindspace that could've led to him living like this.

*He'll worry, Eddie thinks, if I don't do it now. So I have to do it now.*

But he can't. Somehow. He can't.

Slowly, he flexes his right hand in the air, clenching and unclenching the fingers. He feels cold.

"It's cold as balls here," Richie voices the thought, sniffing. The tip of his nose is red. His voice drops, a little, betraying the worry earlier than Eddie expected, "Who keeps *you* warm at night when I'm not here, huh?"

"Can't really afford anything else right now," Eddie tells him evasively. It's not the truth, and Eddie is a bad liar.

"Hm," is all Richie says.

He could do it now and get it over with. Should. But he can't make himself form the words yet, the sight and feeling of Richie right there next to him too fresh and uncertain to dilute with anything else. And Eddie's *nervous*. Sick from nerves, almost.

"Make yourself at home," he says, avoiding Richie's eyes. "I'll make us food."

*What the fuck are you so scared of?* he asks himself in the kitchen. *This is nothing final.* He wants to laugh at himself, but can't. There's a stinging, panicky feeling in his throat that only seems to expand. Soon he won't be able to breathe. *It's just another way you can go. Or not.*

Five months earlier, Eddie has dialled a number straight after smoking a pack of cigarettes on his own in one go.

"Who's *this*?"

"Hi, dad," Eddie has said, lips stiff and unyielding. "It's Eddie. I, uh. I need a favour."

So maybe he's scared, Eddie now thinks, pouring the water into the kettle, because he knows the way he *wants* to go now.

---

Later, thawing and sleepy from warmth, all lights out except the dim sheen of the television and the street outside, Eddie pushes himself up on the sofa. Richie seems to be on the brink of falling sleep, the blue cast of the movie reflected in his glasses. He has an arm around Eddie and his long legs stretched out in front of him, ankles hooked on the armchair.

For a slow, drawn-out moment, Eddie lets himself *look* at him, taking in each small shadow and crinkle of the well-learned features of his well-loved face. Then Richie turns his head to meet his eyes.

Now, Eddie thinks. Shifting on the couch, he hikes a leg over Richie's thighs and levers himself into his lap. Smiling hazily, Richie blinks up at him, and reaches to cup the side of Eddie's face.

Eddie allows himself to close his eyes and lean into the touch for *only* a second.

Then he says, hoarsely, "I've got something for you."

"That's not possible," Richie announces hazily, his hand sliding from Eddie's face and settling on his waist instead. "I've acquired everything I could possibly want already."

Eddie blinks. Swallows. His heart picks up, pulse scattershot under the skin, and he thinks Richie *must* feel it under the tips of his fingers.

"Well. I'm gonna make you an offer," he says in a low voice, with a lurch in his stomach, "you *can* refuse. But think about it."

At that, Richie seems to focus at last, eyebrows knitting together over his tired eyes as he takes in Eddie's serious expression.

"What are you up to?" he mutters.

Breathing shallowly, and not letting himself break eye contact for even a moment, Eddie reaches to the inside pocket of his jacket and pulls out a small package wrapped in brown paper. Richie gives a startled laugh, the sound loud and fragile in the apartment's cottony silence. His eyes are wide behind his glasses.

"What's that?" he says, voice cracking slightly, missing the usual pitch of his joke, *just* so. "You wanna, what, get hitched, baby? Tie the knot? Make an honest man out of me?"

Instead of replying, Eddie pushes the package into Richie's hand. "Open it."

Richie's smile fades a little as he takes it, their fingers colliding clumsily. Fleeting, Eddie thinks of a cigarette passed on the porch steps. *A lifetime* ago.

But then Richie unwraps the parcel, and tenses up.

Quiet, nearly numb with nerves, Eddie watches him flip the little book open on the marked page.

"Well," Eddie says, quietly. "As good as. If you'll have me."

It's barely anything, to unknowing eyes. A scrap of paper, stuck to the page.

US EMBASSY WARSAW

KASPRZAK EDWARD FRANCISZEK

For a long moment, Richie doesn't say anything. He barely even moves. Eddie hears his own terrified heart puncture the silence, and he waits.

Finally, Richie's voice. So *quiet*.

"How did you—"

"The Great Soviet Union didn't live through the ages, after all," Eddie says sarcastically, trying to talk over the anxious strain of his vocal cords. "And, well. I knew what I wanted this time."

There's another silence, almost endless, Richie's face still stubbornly downturned. Then, jerkily, Richie brings one of his hands to his face and presses it under his glasses. He still doesn't move, except something of slight tremor in his shoulders.

It takes Eddie a second to understand that Richie is crying.

"Hey, stop," he says, stroking through Richie's hair. "Hey, *Richie*, stop fucking crying."

Richie shakes his head, face crumpled. When Eddie tries to take it in both his hands and force Richie to look at him, Richie gathers him up and pulls closer into his lap instead. *Close*. Face pressed directly into Eddie's nervous heart. He breathes in, spasmodically.

*What were you so scared of?* Eddie runs his hands through Richie's hair again, pressing his lips to Richie's temple.

"Richie," he says, half-amused. "*Kochanie*." *Sweetheart*.

Richie shakes his head again and holds him tighter.

*It's just a new way to go. Don't look.*

*Don't look back.*

## Notes:

there's this intensely erotic poem about picking raspberries in polish and i've been thinking about it quite a lot

anyway. i hope you've enjoyed it. if you did, please talk to me i'm fragile and crave validation

u can find me on twitter @ [lvslies](#) :)

[update: *all the absolutely stunning and breathtaking art made for cherry vodka can be now found [here](#). ♡* ]

**Series this work belongs to:**

- Part 1 of the [motion picture](#) series [Next Work →](#)